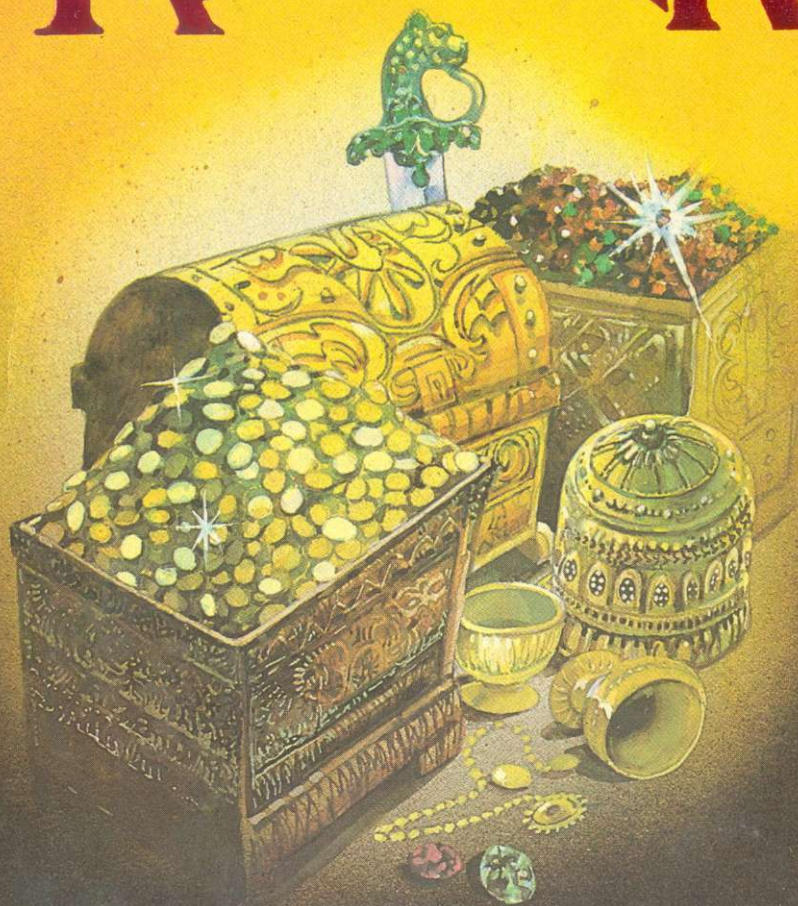




A CBT PUBLICATION

THE TREASURE OF KUMBHER



Krishna Narayan

THE TREASURE OF KUMBHER

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Cover by Subir Roy

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Children's Book Trust, New Delhi

***The Treasure of Kumbher* won the first prize in the category Indian History in the X Competition for Writers of Children's Books organised by Children's Book Trust.**

The other titles by the author published by CBT are *The Alien Planet* and *The Girl Who Was Not Built Right*.

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1

It was the month of May 1787. The summer was at the peak of its intensity. The brown landscape of central and northern India stretched endlessly into the horizon. Nothing stirred in the blistering heat, not a leaf, not a blade of grass, not even a breath of air. Even the insects and the desert lizards had crept under the rocks to shelter themselves from the sun.

Across this burning plain moved a man and his horse. The horse's head drooped with fatigue, its flanks glistened with sweat; saliva dribbled from its jaws in a milky thread. The man swung loosely with the movement of his mount. His face, his coarse shirt and trousers were dark with sweat and dirt. The man was on the verge of collapse.

Suddenly the horse stopped. The rider slowly raised his head and looked about him. The drab landscape extended as far as his eye could see.

The horse's legs buckled and it sank to its belly. The man rolled off the saddle in a reflex action but was not quick enough. There was an audible crack, and the rider

yond his usual territory. Apart from extracting tax monies from his own lands, he had made bold to levy a 'contribution' of fifty thousand rupees from the king of an adjoining state. The king had refused to pay. Senor Noronha had promptly set torch to the fields and outlying areas of the state till the king begged for mercy. Nevertheless, Senor Noronha directed his troops to plunder the land, which they did with savage relish. Now he was returning victorious, laden with loot — gold, silver, ivory and skins. He could not rest till the baggage was transported to his stronghold at Harchu. His share of the loot had to be deposited into his coffers.

Flanking the stallion were Senor Noronha's two pet Afghan hounds, straining at the leash, dragging along the native footmen who held them. Suddenly the hounds began to bark furiously. They broke free and bounded across the plain. The footmen yelled and went after them in pursuit.

Senor Noronha stopped and shaded his eyes. His gaze followed the dogs as they sped towards a tree in the distance. A couple of birds hovered above. From their slow weaving motion, he knew they were vultures. His fingers tightened on the bridle.

The dogs appeared to be sniffing at an object on the ground. One of them threw its head back and howled. Senor Noronha spurred his horse to a canter. As he drew near the tree, he saw a man sprawled face down on the sand. Red ants scurried over his body. The man appeared more dead than alive.

Senor Noronha had found Prithviraj Chandola.

When Prithviraj regained consciousness, he found himself lying on a string cot in a tent. It was dark. A lantern burnt dimly in a corner. A small figure lay huddled on the floor, fast asleep. Prithviraj tried to move into an upright position. The next moment he was flat on the cot, screaming in pain. His leg felt as if it was on fire. The man on the floor stirred awake.

"Water!" gasped Prithviraj. "In God's name, give me water!" The small man rose. He raised the lantern wick. He brought a jug of water and held it to Prithviraj's lips. He drank greedily, his eyes closed, his senses absorbing the delicious coolness that spread through his body. Then he fell back, and slept. The old man put the jug back on the stool. He looked ruminatively at the figure on the cot, and went out of the tent into the night.

When Prithviraj awoke, sunlight was streaming into the tent. He could hear the chatter of voices outside. The smell of smoke and cooking assailed his nostrils. In the distance he heard a goat bleat and a pestle pound on mortar. Where was he? He was too tired to find out. He shut his eyes, and dreamed. He dreamed of his village, his friends and acquaintances and of the circumstances under which he had left his home.

"Prithvi," he heard his mother say, "why do you leave? I plead and weep for you to stay, but you are too proud to listen. We may not be rich, but we have this house and plenty to eat. You are still young and innocent. How will you survive?"

Prithviraj remained silent. He would not let his mother's tears melt his resolve.

The old woman tried again. "You are the only one I

have in this world. How can you go, leaving me all alone?"

But Prithviraj was adamant. He was going to be a warrior. It was his life's ambition. It was an ambition he had harboured for many years, even as a little boy.

It had been the village blacksmith who had fired his imagination. The blacksmith was an ex-soldier, who had a stump where his leg should have been. Every evening, seated on the *pyol* in front of his hut, he would spin fascinating stories of his life as a sepoy, and of the campaigns in which he had taken part. He had fought under the Marathas and the Rajputs, and for a while even under the British. After he lost his leg, he had returned to the village, and taken up a trade that needed little more than a strong pair of arms.

"Ah, those were the days," would begin the blacksmith, a faraway look in his eyes. "We marched across the desert for two days and two nights till we reached Kishingarh fort. In the next six hours, mind you, just six hours, the Major sahib had gained entry into the fort. It was a glorious moment. Our troops charged madly through the gates, eager to be the first to enter. But I was unlucky. A stray bullet from the fort got me in the leg. And as I lay bleeding, Major sahib captured Kishingarh and looted it of every coin it possessed!" And the blacksmith would look at Prithviraj and roll his eyes.

Young Prithviraj would listen spellbound. He decided he would join the British army which was well-knitted and always victorious, unlike the Marathas who were paid poorly and wore no uniforms. He would train to fight every day. He would leave the village soon.

Once his mother realised that she could not shake her son's resolve, she said no more. She pawned the few ornaments she possessed and bought him a horse. The village blacksmith gave him a saddle and stirrups and a broadsword so heavy that Prithviraj could barely haul it off the ground. Prithviraj was ready. The elders of the village got together and tried to remember the direction he should take to reach the nearest army camp. They told him to ride across the plains. It would take him no more than a day to reach the British settlement. The whole village turned out to send him on his way.

The directions, however, turned out to be wrong, and at the end of the third day Prithviraj knew that he was hopelessly lost...

Prithviraj drifted back slowly to the present. He felt someone shake him by the shoulder. He opened his eyes, and found an old man squatting beside him, a bowl of lentils in his hands. Prithviraj realised he was ravenously hungry. He raised himself on his elbows, and gratefully accepted the food that the old man fed him.

"It was lucky for you that we happened to pass by when we did," said the old man. "Another hour or two, and who knows?" He shrugged his shoulders. "This should teach you never to venture across these treacherous plains alone. One often misjudges distances and loses one's way. You should have joined a caravan."

He broke off when he heard footfalls outside. The tent flap opened, and there stood the imposing figure of Senor Noronha. He was no longer dressed in his riding habit, but in an embroidered scarlet gown drawn in at

the waist with a silk sash. The old man leapt to his feet.

Senor Noronha regarded Prithviraj keenly but with detachment, as if he were a strange species of insect. He withdrew from his gown a cheroot and put it between his teeth. The old man rushed out of the tent, returned with a lighted taper and held it to the cheroot. Senor Noronha inhaled deeply, and exhaled. The tent was filled with tobacco smoke.

"This is our sahib," whispered the old man. "He enquires after your health."

Prithviraj folded his hands humbly. Senor Noronha ignored him. Without a word he turned on his heel and left. Prithviraj ought to have felt humiliated, but was not. He was overawed. Senor Noronha was the first white man he had ever seen. How tall, how fair, how distinguished the sahib looked! How fortunate that he had lost his way, only to be rescued by this lion among men!

"You owe him your life, and don't you forget it," said the old man, picking up the bowl and holding a heaped spoonful to Prithviraj's lips.

2

The latter half of the eighteenth century was one of the most turbulent periods in Indian history. With the death of Aurangzeb, the mighty Mughal emperor, the Mughal empire that spanned the length and breadth of India and dominated the land for over two centuries,

was steadily breaking up. The latter day emperors were poor rulers. Drunk with luxury and enamoured of soft living, they failed to learn to retain their power. So it was that in the year 1787, Shah Alam II, descendant of the great Jalaluddin Akbar, sat on a tottering throne, clinging to an empire that extended no further than the outskirts of Delhi.

With the vacuum of power at the centre, every prince, every chieftain and village headman became a law unto himself and preyed on the hapless citizens to extract whatever he could. The system of local administration collapsed. Land was left untitled. Canals and waterways were allowed to run dry. The rural population, in despair, turned to banditry. To cap it all, there descended from across the seas a horde of foreign adventurers like Senor Noronha with modern weaponry, who stole and plundered at will. Afghans, Rajputs, Sikhs, Marathas and other warring castes turned central India into a theatre of destruction.

A product of these turbulent times was the Afghan Ismail Beg, a young, footloose adventurer in search of a fortune. He had rich and powerful connections, notably an uncle in Shah Alam's court, who provided him with some money and fighting men and bade him to go forth and fend for himself.

Ismail Beg hoped to find his fortune in the fort of Kumbher. It was a little kingdom, inconspicuously tucked away among the plateaus of north Deccan, distant enough to escape the ravages of Mughals during their campaigns. Ismail Beg hoped to capture Kumbher, and thereby lay his hands on a rich hoard of treasure.

The extent of Kumbher's wealth was not widely

known. The present king, Raja Balwant Singh, came of a succession of Rajputs who had ruled Kumbher wisely and well. Unnoticed by predators, the little kingdom had grown and prospered, and the coffers of the royal house had swelled till the contents were said to be more resplendent and valuable than that which lay in the strongroom within the Red Fort, the abode of Shah Alam himself.

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It was night. The palace and the fort of Kumbher were bathed in the soft light of the moon. The air hung heavy with the scent of jasmine and roses that flowered in the palace garden. In his bedchamber, Raja Balwant Singh tossed and turned, unable to sleep. His brain was crowded with a thousand thoughts, a thousand vexing questions that had no answers. Driven by anxiety, he threw the bedclothes aside and rose from his cot. He went down the corridor and ascended the spiral staircase that led to the terrace in the east wing of the palace. Leaning against the parapet, he cast his gaze beyond the palace grounds and surveyed the city of Kumbher from which his kingdom took its name.

The city had grown on three sides of a large, gently sloping hill. The fort was built on the rise of the hill, overlooking the city. At the rear of the fort stood the palace, and behind the palace was a waste of rock-strewn country, scored by deep ravines, ending in cliffs several hundred feet high. The geography of Kumbher provided it with a unique natural defence that discouraged any invader, perhaps the reason why Kumbher had been left alone for so long.

In the midst of the surrounding depredation and anarchy, Kumbher shone like a jewel in a mudheap. The tax officials were just, the granaries were full. In his eighteen years as king, Raja Balwant Singh had extended and strengthened his frontiers, and bought peace with his neighbours. He had pruned down his army to a compact and efficient fighting force.

The king's eyes scanned beyond the limits of the city. He could see nothing in the darkness, but he knew that somewhere over the horizon loomed the latest threat to the sovereignty of Kumbher. The king's spies had already apprised him of Ismail Beg's intentions to march against him.

Raja Balwant Singh passed a hand over his brow. He was tired. His once indomitable spirit now detested the very idea of war; his body now groaned in protest. Raja Balwant Singh was never thrilled at the prospect of vanquishing an opponent, for he knew that sorrow and death alone were the true fruits of war. He wanted peace.

"I am getting old," said the king to himself. He heard footsteps behind him. He turned, one hand on the parapet. It was Jai Singh, his son.

Jai Singh, at twenty, was already a strapping young man, taller than his father. His eyes were bold and open, his chin firm. The king's heart filled with pride at the sight of his son. He saw in him an earlier image of himself, a worthy successor to the throne of Kumbher.

Jai Singh touched his father on the shoulder. "You haven't slept, father," he said accusingly.

"Sleep?" the king smiled wryly. "How can I sleep? Tell me, why haven't you slept?" He waved his hand in

the direction of the plains, the direction from which Ismail Beg would launch his offensive. "You are as worried as I am, are you not?"

There was a pause as father and son gazed at the city below, at the clusters of brown houses and the shadows of criss-crossing streets. "These are bad times, son," said the king. "The laws of the land have long since been buried. Men have become beasts. I am concerned not so much for myself as for you and Chandravati, and for Kumbher."

"But father, we have a strong ally in Madhoji Sindhia. Why don't we ask him for help? Ismail Beg dare not attack us if he knew that he would have to face Madhoji as well!"

Madhoji Sindhia was a legendary Maratha general, commander of a large fighting force, a man who even nursed ambitions of displacing Shah Alam and establishing Maratha rule at Delhi.

Raja Balwant Singh shook his head. "Madhoji is in no position to help us at the moment," he said. "He has lately suffered serious defeats, one after the other, I understand he is now camped at Deeg, recouping his losses, waiting for the ill-winds to blow over. No, my son, we will have to face Ismail Beg ourselves."

Jai Singh walked along the terrace, his head bowed. He looked down again at the city, and thought of his subjects — the men, women and children who slept soundly in their homes, secure in the belief that their king would protect them. Jai Singh felt the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders, and understood the cause of his father's anxiety.

From the corner of his eye he noticed the heavy

curtains of the doorway draw apart. A silhouette appeared on the landing, hesitated, then approached. It was Chandravati, daughter of Raja Balwant Singh, and Jai Singh's younger sister. In the dim light her skin shone like ivory, her tresses gleamed and flowed to her knees in a dark river. The beauty and nobility of her ancestry sprang forth from every line, every curve of her face and figure.

At the moment, however, her face mirrored her concern. "What are both of you doing here at this time of the night?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing whatsoever," replied the king. "We were only wondering which lucky man was going to claim the hand of our princess!"

"Father!" exclaimed Chandravati with mock severity, and blushed. She took her father's face in her hands. "You worry too much," she said. "Come, let us go to bed."

Raja Balwant Singh turned to his son. "Take your sister down, will you? I will follow in a while."

Jai Singh opened his mouth to protest, but the expression on his father's face stopped him. He escorted his sister across the terrace towards her chamber. Raja Balwant Singh was alone once more. In the shadows of the night, he allowed himself to unlock from his breast his deepest fear regarding the safety of Kumbher. For, it was neither Ismail Beg nor Shah Alam who posed a threat to his kingdom. The enemy lay within. The enemy was none other than his own flesh and blood — his elder sister, Janki Devi.

More than once Raja Balwant Singh had been tempted to voice his fears to his son, but had refrained at the

last moment. Janki Devi was disloyal to the throne, of that he had no doubt. The king needed proof, not circumstantial evidence, however damning. Until then, he dared not poison the mind of Jai Singh.

The incident that first caused him to suspect Janki Devi had occurred almost a year ago. That morning the king had cut short his *darbar* (court) to visit his sister. Janki Devi and her son Kunwar Singh stayed separately in a large mansion outside the palace walls. Traditionally, the royal house of Kumbher lived under one roof, but Janki Devi had chosen to break the tradition.

The front rooms of the mansion were deserted, and so the king had strolled into Janki Devi's private apartments, unannounced. He had found Janki Devi deep in conversation with a stranger. The look of stark guilt on their faces and the quivering rage with which Janki Devi had ordered him out of her residence, convinced the king that he had interrupted a private and very dubious discussion.

Raja Balwant Singh had his men follow the stranger out of Kumbher. He was identified as Rukhayat Khan's nephew. Rukhayat Khan was his bitter foe. The incident had caused the king many a sleepless night.

The second incident was more recent, Janki Devi had proceeded from Kumbher to visit the Kali temple at Chirania. It was a monthly ritual with her, and Raja Balwant Singh had not given it a thought until one of his spies reported to him that Janki Devi had been sighted at Najibabad, nowhere near Chirania. The chieftain of the Najibabad fort was none other than Rukhayat Khan!

The king had waited for an explanation on Janki

Devi's return; she said nothing.

Separate incidents, not very significant in themselves, but put together, they were indicative of a deep design. The king believed Janki Devi was working against him. Raja Balwant Singh was a fair man. He knew that suspicion was a cancer that tormented and destroyed the individual. It was not right to expose Jai Singh to that deadly disease.

The eastern sky was beginning to light up with the first blush of dawn. Raja Balwant Singh shifted his feet. His joints ached from standing immobile for so long. He cast another long look at his city before turning away.

"She is beautiful," he said to himself. "She is like a beautiful woman, coveted by one and all. But he who lays his claim on Kumbher will do so over my dead body."

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Barely a fortnight later, Raja Balwant Singh's worst fears came true. Ismail Beg attacked the fort of Kumbher.

It was, however, an attack doomed from the start. For one thing, Ismail Beg's army, like himself, was motivated solely by the prospect of quick gain. It was only through promises of an easy victory that Ismail Beg had managed to gather his men and keep them together. Such an army that bore no loyalty to its leader, nor to a higher cause, was bound to lose.

Secondly, Ismail Beg chose the wrong time to attack. It was the height of summer, that terrible period before the rains, when the sun roasts the earth

and the air sears the body like heat from a furnace. The weather saps the life-blood of man and beast, robbing them of any desire to win a battle. Ismail Beg's army was fatigued even before the first blow. Kumbher's troops, defend as they did from within the protective walls of the fort, were thus at an advantage.

Ismail Beg was aware that his bid to capture Kumbher held little chance of success. He had no choice, however. He was desperately short of funds; he was desperate for victory, however elusive. So, with his ragtag band of four hundred foot soldiers, two score horsemen and cannons, Ismail Beg stormed the Kumbher fort. He announced his intentions at dawn with a thunderburst of cannon and continued the barrage of shell fire for several hours.

Although there was hardly any reply from within, the fort stood firm. The sun was setting, and Ismail Beg ordered that flares be lit so that the assault could continue.

Then, by sheer chance, two cannon balls struck at the same spot on the fort rampart which crumbled to its foundations. With a roar of triumph Ismail Beg rallied his men to the breach.

Just then the massive gates of Kumbher fort swung open. A body of horsemen, with Jai Singh at their head, poured out of the gates, swords drawn. The battle-cry of Kumbher rent the air. Simultaneously, the hitherto silent ramparts burst alive with a hail of gunfire.

Ismail Beg's army was taken completely by surprise at this counter-attack. Jai Singh and his cavalry

ebarged at them in an unending wave and mowed them down like ripe corn in the fields. Ismail Beg tried to regroup his men but in vain. Finally, he too turned tail and fled.

Ismail Beg's hasty and ill-fated bid had failed. Kumbher was safe.

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That night there was muted rejoicing in Kumbher. Chandravati arranged for continuous prayers and offerings in temples all over the city. She led Jai Singh to the family deity installed within the palace. In the presence of the deity, she presented him with a scabbard of beaten gold.

"A strange gift, dear sister," said Jai Singh with a smile. "Surely you don't wish that I go to battle in order to wear this?"

"I hope tyour Word remains sheathed forever," said Chandravati. Her large eyes brimmed with tears.

Jai Singh put his arms around her affectionately. "You must not worry," he said, "Ismail Beg is soundly beaten. There is no more threat. Come.*"

Together 'they 'crossed [the]lamp-lit courtyard to the western end of the palace and ascended the stairs. Jai Singh left his sister in her chamber and was returning to his own room when the noise of unusual activity in the hall below caught his ear. He went down to investigate. He came upon a strange sight.

Raja Balwant Singh was seated on his throne. Before him stood two guards and between them they held Kunwar Singh, Janki Devi's son. Kunwar Singh was hunched forward, his head against his chest.

Jai Singh looked askance at his father. Raja Balwant Singh ignored him.

"What is the meaning of this?" inquired Jai Singh of the guards.

"Thakur Kunwar Singh was leading the enemy through a gap in the western wall," replied the guard. "That part of the fort was left undefended while we rode to the main gates."

"I was on patrol when they entered," said the other. "There were about twenty of them. I raised the alarm. Some of our troops arrived and we managed to beat them back."

"I lost a dozen of my best men," said another voice. It was Fauj Ram, one of the king's commanders. "Were it not for them, Kumbher could have been taken from within."

Jai Singh looked at Kunwar Singh in disbelief — a member of the royal family helping Ismail Beg? "Why did you do it?" he demanded. "For God's sake, why?"

Kunwar Singh shook off the guards who held him. He was a man of medium height, overweight. He was about forty years of age, although his flabby figure made him look ten years older. His shifty black eyes were defiant.

"I would do it again," he said. "What have we gained, my mother and I, by being loyal to the throne? I know you, Jai Singh. You hate us! We will forever live on nothing but crumbs from your table."

Jai Singh was thunderstruck. He stepped forward, arm raised aloft, then checked himself. Kunwar Singh was twice his age.

"Is that all you betrayed us for?" he exclaimed. "You fool, do you really believe that I would cheat you out of your due, while Ismail Beg would safeguard your interests?"

"I want my share of the royal fortunes," said Kunwar Singh sullenly.

"You shall get what you deserve." All eyes turned towards the throne. "Throw him into the cells, Fauj Ram," ordered Raja Balwant Singh. His voice was cold. "Kunwar Singh shall be hanged at dawn tomorrow."

The blood drained from Kunwar Singh's face and he collapsed on the floor. No one moved. There was silence in the palace hall.

At that moment an elderly woman rushed into the room. She let out a shriek when she saw the prone body. She whirled around to face the king.

"What have you done to him?" she screamed. "May the gods strike you dead, Balwant Singh, for seeking to kill my son!"

"Janki Devi, you are distraught," said the king. "Not a hair on his head has been harmed."

"Mother, save me!" cried Kunwar Singh, clutching at the hem of her dress and quivering like a jelly. "They are going to hang me!"

Janki Devi's jaw dropped in horror. She looked up. Her brother's expression held no mercy. She searched Jai Singh's face. "Save my son!" she pleaded, falling at his feet. Jai Singh moved back, embarrassed.

"Your Highness may wish to reconsider his decision," he said, addressing his father.

"You waste your breath, Jai Singh," said the king

sharply. "The penalty for treachery is death."

"Father, Thakur Kunwar Singh is of royal blood. He cannot be treated like a common criminal. I beseech you to spare his life."

Raja Balwant Singh turned his head away. The guards hoisted Kunwar Singh off the floor and prepared to take him to prison. Jai Singh tried for the last time. "Father, if anything were to happen to me after your time, there is none but my cousin Kunwar..." he did not finish the sentence, but the meaning was perfectly clear: Kunwar Singh was second in line to the succession of the throne.

There was a long pause. Everyone in the room waited with bated breath.

"Let him go," said Raja Balwant Singh at last.

Kunwar Singh shrugged himself free. He seethed with humiliation, but was crafty enough to hide his feelings. Janki Devi rose to her feet and took his hand. Her face was ugly with hatred. Instead of expressing her gratitude, she gave her brother a look of pure poison before she swept out of the hall. The king watched them go, knowing he had won himself an implacable enemy.

"We did not do the right thing, Jai Singh," he said. "You insisted that a traitor be set free, and I was foolish enough to agree. Anyhow, send word to Madhoji Sindhia that we need his help. The snakes which lay hidden so long have now come in to the open. When they strike, we must be ready."

3

Senor Noronha began life as Velasco Braganzer Noronha. Born of poor Portuguese parentage, Velasco Noronha spent his boyhood on the streets of Oporto. At fifteen he smuggled himself on board a merchant vessel. For the next five years he sailed on various ships, serving as bootblack, cabin boy and coxswain. The rough and tumble life at sea toughened Velasco Noronha, fast converting him from a raw youth to a man.

At last, Velasco Noronha boarded an east bound ship and disembarked at Calcutta. The penalty for jumping ship was severe — sixty days of working the oars, chained to the lower deck — so young Noronha fled inland, working his way along. At a time when men fought over every inch of land and every ear of corn, mercenaries were in great demand. Anyone who possessed a strong arm and a keen eye was welcome to join the fray. Noronha hired himself out to the Nawab of Buxar as the supervisor of his gun-casting works.

Noronha rose swiftly in the Nawab's employ. He was promoted to captain of the guard, then to superintendent of the arsenal. In truth, Noronha knew nothing of the nature of these tasks, but what he did not know he learned or improvised. His white skin and forceful personality saw him through the rest.

It was about this time that Velasco Noronha developed a hunger for money. He began by taking a commission on all purchases made for the armoury. He undertook the daily provisioning of the Nawab's

troops, and made a tidy sum thereupon. He bought lands around Buxar and cultivated indigo which he exported through hired agents. In the space of fifteen years, Velasco Noronha grew enormously rich.

At thirty-five, Noronha realised that money was not everything. He wanted to be more than merely a wealthy merchant. He wanted fame and power, and entry into the higher reaches of society. Therefore, Noronha put together an army of five hundred men and promoted himself to the rank of General. He set up his headquarters at Harchu and made known that his services were available — at a price.

Along the way, Velasco Braganzer Noronha became Senor Noronha.

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Senor Noronha was seated in an armchair under the shade of the *neem* tree in front of his residence. His body was covered with a clean white sheet. His face was profusely lathered; beside him his barber stropped his razor on the leather thong that hung from the tree. Senor Noronha, running his toes over the glossy Afghan hound at his feet, settled down to enjoy his noonday shave.

The barber tautened the skin at his throat; at that moment the hound gave a yelp. Senor Noronha cracked open an eye. Four horsemen were coming through the gates into his courtyard. Two of them were his own guards. He did not recognise the other two, for the sun cast a shadow directly across their faces.

They came nearer and he saw that it was none other than Madhoji Sindhia himself, accompanied by his

faithful lieutenant Rana Khan. A sliver of ice coursed through Senor Noronha's spine. If Madhoji Sindhia was here to see him in person, then surely it must be on a matter of great importance. *

It irritated him that their arrival had spoiled his pleasurable afternoon, and for a moment he considered asking them to wait until he had shaved, but refrained. Madhoji Sindhia might take it amiss, and it would not do well to annoy him.

Senor Noronha gestured to his barber to wipe the lather off his face. He rose from the armchair, slipped on his velvet slippers and bowed from the waist.

"To what do I owe the honour of this visit?" he asked. "But first, shall we go inside?"

He led them towards his vast, colonnaded house that gleamed white in the sun. The riders dismounted. The three of them walked up the steps and stood on the marble verandah.

"You live well, indeed," said Madhoji Sindhia with a wry smile. His eyes ran over the silk drapes, the plump cushions, the bowls of fruit, the tigerskin on the floor.

"Some wine for the General?"

Madhoji Sindhia shook his head. "I must refuse, for I have little time. First, the purpose of my visit. I need your help against a dangerous enemy." He crossed over to a cushion and sat down. "I refer to that Afghan brigand, Ismail Beg."

Senor Noronha listened attentively. Madhoji Sindhia spoke slowly, and each word carried authority and precision. "Friend, you are aware of the anarchy that prevails around us. The Mughal power is becoming extinct. Petty adventurers like Ismail Beg have begun to

act like kings. It is obvious that if the land is to prosper, the Maratha flag must fly all over Hindustan."

Senor Noronha's first reaction was one of contempt. What cared he for the prosperity of Hindustan? He was no native chief to be swayed by loyalties of birth or caste! Like all mercenaries, he simply sold his services to the highest bidder.

"It is my aim to create an empire ruled by the Marathas," continued Madhoji Sindhia. "For this, it is necessary to cultivate and protect trusted allies. Raja Balwant Singh of Kumbher is one such ally. He is now in dire straits and needs protection against Ismail Beg."

"Ismail Beg attacked Kumbher a week ago," said Senor Noronha. "I understand he was routed by the king's army."

"Ismail Beg will strike again and with a larger force this time," said Madhoji Sindhia. He rose from his seat and paced the room. Rana Khan backed away to the wall respectfully.

"Unfortunately, the present times are bad for me and the Marathas. I am sure you are aware of it," continued Madhoji Sindhia. "I cannot go to Kumbher's aid, much as I would like to do so. Senor Noronha, I request you to march to Kumbher and defend her on my behalf."

Senor Noronha did not like the proposal at all. He had just returned after a tiring foray into his dominions, and had no desire to move out again. Neither was he interested in furthering Madhoji Sindhia's political ambitions and play bodyguard to some petty king! He kept his face impassive.

"Times are bad everywhere, General," he said. "The peasantry is rebellious, and I have been unable to

collect the dues from my lands this year. Part of my army is disbanded."

"I do not forget a favour," said Madhoji Sindhia as if he had not heard. "You shall be richly rewarded when the time comes."

"My men are otherwise engaged," said Senor Noronha. "It will be difficult for me to fight Balwant Singh's battles for him." It was a polite refusal.

There was a pause. "I wonder if our horses are ready," said Madhoji Sindhia suddenly. He turned away and walked slowly down the steps. Rana Khan moved to face Senor Noronha. "You forget your limits," he said coldly. "Madhoji Sindhia has not travelled all this way to take no for an answer. What Madhoji desires, it shall be your privilege to execute."

Senor Noronha regarded the short, ugly man with scorn. "And what if I don't?" he asked.

"Then I shall slit your throat," said Rana Khan softly, drawing a dagger from the folds of his trousers. Senor Noronha flinched. He knew Rana Khan would not hesitate to carry out his threat. He looked out onto the courtyard. Madhoji Sindhia was cunningly keeping the guards busy with the horses. The fools had seen nothing!

Senor Noronha was angry for falling into such a simple trap, but did not show it. He looked down at the dagger, then at Rana Khan. "Put that away," he said. "Let me speak to your master." Together they descended the steps.

"It shall be as you desire," announced Senor Noronha to Madhoji Sindhia. "I shall proceed to Kumbher to assist the king against Ismail Beg, or any other."

Madhoji Sindhia turned. He smiled, showing a mouthful of yellow teeth. "I knew I could depend on you, my friend. God be with you! My mind is now at rest. But," he added as he swung into the saddle, "I trust you will not go back upon your word, for the Marathas have a long arm, and a longer memory!"

Senor Noronha watched Madhoji Sindhia and Rana Khan ride out of his residence. His brow furrowed in thought. The horses disappeared in the distance in a cloud of dust. Senor Noronha decided he would go to Kumbher. He would protect Kumbher well indeed, so well that when the time came to squeeze Kumbher dry, there would be enough and more to compensate him for his pains. That native, Madhoji Sindhia, thought he had got the better of him. The fool! He did not know Senor Velasco Noronha!

4

After the dry beat of summer comes the monsoon, an annual feature unique to India. The monsoon sustains life in the countryside. For two months the heavens open up in a continuous downpour. Trees sprout leaves afresh. The mighty rivers rise and flow beyond their banks. The farmers breathe a prayer for this bounty of nature and sow their fields.

For the soldiers, however, the rains are more a curse than a blessing. Huge areas of land turn into sheets of water, impossible to cross. Tracks become running streams. Carts and gun-carriages bog themselves down

in the mud. Tents leak incessantly, waterlogging the ground beneath, animals fall sick, and campaigns are either delayed or called off. It is a time of painful waiting.

Ismail Beg sat brooding in his tent. His fortunes were at their lowest ebb. His assault on Kumbher two months ago had ended disastrously. He was unable to pay even his depleted army, and they were deserting him in droves. His former associates now spurned him. Only Rukhayat Khan, sworn enemy of Raja Balwant Singh, had offered him a helping hand, and permitted him to camp on the outskirts of Najibabad. Ismail Beg knew that he would have to repay the favour heavily when the time came.

He needed money badly. If only he could capture the coffers of Kumbher! A pain that was almost physical in its intensity, gripped him as he remembered how he had been routed by Raja Balwant Singh. To top it all, now there was Senor Noronha, the foreigner, appointed to defend the city!

In an effort to shake off his mood of depression, Ismail Beg got up and stepped out of the tent. He was compactly built, slim-hipped and well-muscled. There was a certain roguish handsomeness about him that masked his vicious, unscrupulous nature. The man knew neither fear nor mercy.

He turned to his favourite pastime of trying to imagine the treasure hidden in the bowels of Kumbher. He called one of his guards. "Get me that rascal of a mason," he said. The fellow returned in a few moments leading a blind, old man. This was the head mason who, many years ago, had supervised the building of

the strongroom that held Kumbher's treasure. Raja Balwant Singh had directed that the room be built in utmost secrecy. Even the workmen were brought to the site and taken away blindfolded. None but the king and the head mason knew the details of its construction. The king had paid well to ensure the mason's silence.

Alas! the mason turned greedy. A few years later, under the pretext of repairing the walls, he had loosened some bricks in the ceiling in one corner of the room. Then, under cover of darkness, he had returned. What he did not know was that the king had installed an independent safety device, a trip wire that set off an alarm in the royal bedchamber in case of intrusion.

The mason with his bulging sack was caught red-handed as he crawled out of the strongroom.

More in sorrow than in anger, Raja Balwant Singh punished the man who had so betrayed his trust. The mason was blinded and driven out of the city. Ismail Beg, who came to know of the incident, promptly located him and took custody of the helpless man.

"Tell me about the treasure, you old fool," he said. He had heard the mason's story a dozen times before, yet he hungered to hear it again.

"The room is large and lined with rows of heavy wooden chests," said the mason, blinking his sightless eyes. "Each chest overflows with gold, diamonds, pearls, coins, a sea of wealth that dazzles the eye! Verily, it is a sight for the gods!"

The description never failed to send the blood rushing to Ismail Beg's brain. He stood still, his mouth open, his eyes star-struck. "It is all there within the palace, is it not?"

"Yes, yes! There is a trapdoor in one of the rooms, I forget which, and below it is a ladder that goes down and there lies the treasure, the likes of which no man has ever seen!"

There was a pause. Suddenly, Ismail Beg swung his hand and hit the old man across the face. The man staggered back with the force of the blow. "And how do I get into the palace, you doddering goat! You and your tall tales! Get out of my sight before I strangle your scrawny neck!"

He turned on his heel and swept into the tent. He was filled with an unreasoning fury. Why was there no communication from Kunwar Singh for so long? Had the fat fool changed his mind? Was he dead, or in prison after being caught helping the enemy? How long did he, Ismail Beg, have to wait in this fashion?

. * *

The rains had come and gone.

There is no autumn in the cycle of seasons in northern India. After the rains which lash the countryside during the months of July and August, there follows a period of sultry weather comparable to summer, in some ways more uncomfortable. The air is heavy and humid, the swamps breed mosquitoes and disease. There is little to be cheerful about.

An uneasy calm prevailed over Kumbher. Ten weeks had passed since Ismail Beg's abortive attack, eight since Senor Noronha had set up camp at Kumbher's frontiers. On the surface everything was normal; trade was brisk in the market-place, tax revenues were sizeable, a bumper crop was predicted. There was no cause

for concern, yet Raja Balwant Singh, with his experience in matters of state, could not shake off his nagging worry. Was it pessimism born of old age? Seated in the privacy of his bedchamber, the king forced himself to analyse the reasons for his uneasiness.

First, there was the curious behaviour of Senor Noronha. The king's repeated overtures had drawn no response from him. His proposal that they meet and evolve a strategy against Ismail Beg was met with silence. Indeed, were it not for Madhoji's assurances that Senor Noronha was an ally, the king might well have concluded that he was more foe than friend.

Secondly, of Ismail Beg there was no further sign. It was uncharacteristic of the man to disappear in this fashion. Like a jungle cat that hurled itself against its opponent, mindless of its own safety, it was expected that Ismail Beg would strike at Kumbher again, and yet again. Why was he lying low?

The last, but not the least of the reasons for the king's concern was that Janki Devi and Kunwar Singh had been released from house arrest the previous day.

Since that fateful night when Kunwar Singh was unmasked as traitor, the king had passed orders preventing mother and son from leaving their residence. The king's action set the town abuzz with rumour and gossip, which grew more strident and malicious as the days passed. The citizens and even the militia took up rival positions, for Janki Devi too commanded a loyal following. Raja Balwant Singh soon realised that the strife in the royal house threatened the very stability of his state. Reluctantly, he set his sister and nephew free.

He now awaited the consequences.

The king sighed and rose, and wondered if he was not seeing dangers where none existed. In any event, he decided to take one more precaution.

He walked along the corridors, taking a right and then a left turn till he reached the far end of the palace. This part of the building was quiet and deserted. The corridor ended at a closed door. Outside, against the wall, sat an old woman. At the sight of the king she scrambled to her feet, startled. The king bade her open the door.

Like always, the stench of rotting flesh hit him like a blow. The room was bare except for a cot, on which lay a figure swathed in white. Maggots swarmed all over the sheet. It was a sight that never failed to revolt him.

The body that lay inert on the bed was the matriarch of the ruling family, Raja Balwant Singh's great-aunt. She was stricken by leprosy, a feared disease of those times, for which there was no cure. Over the years, leprosy had nibbled away at her flesh and bones. The king had summoned every healer, every physician in the land to cure her but in vain. The affliction had forced the lady into isolation. There was no hope of her survival, and she was consigned to the care of an old maidservant who cleaned her body everyday and waited for her to die. Nobody else dared approach this corner of the palace for fear of contracting the horrible disease.

Raja Balwant Singh came out and shut the door behind him. He motioned to the maidservant to follow him to the ground floor. He then led her past the rooms of state, beyond the guest rooms and music rooms, to

an isolated cubicle at the rear of the palace.

"The Rani shall spend her last days here," he told the maidservant. "I shall have a cot put in. Bring her down tonight, and look after her as before."

Jai Singh and Chandravati noticed only a couple of days later that the dying woman had been shifted. They wondered why, as did the rest of the domestic staff. A week later the whole thing was forgotten.

* * *

Janki Devi lived in the tree-lined avenue that wound down from the palace to the main road of Kumbher. Her residence was a gloomy structure that stood in a large, ill-tended garden dotted with dead fountains and lined with crumbling pathways.

It was night, and the ground floor was dark. In one of the first floor rooms sat Janki Devi. On her lap was a piece of paper that conveyed to her terrible tidings. Two of her ships carrying several tons of indigo, bound for Arabia, had sunk in a storm at sea.

Janki Devi shifted her gross body on the sofa. With trembling hands she reached for the paper and reread the contents. There was no mistake. Everything was lost, wiped out at one stroke! She had pledged her property, pawned her jewels and misused her royal privilege to buy and stock those ships. They had gone down without a trace. Janki Devi was utterly and irretrievably ruined.

Kunwar Singh entered the room. He was still celebrating his release and had drunk a good deal of wine. He noticed his mother sitting rigid as if turned into stone. Puzzled, he took the paper from her nerveless

fingers and read the message. The blood drained from his face as the impact of the news dawned upon him. He sank into a chair.

Janki Devi turned slowly towards him. "If Balwant Singh comes to know of this, we are as good as dead," she said. "And he is sure to know — if not tomorrow, then in a week's time, or a fortnight. We must act. It is now or never."

Kunwar Singh gaped at her. The fumes of wine still swirled in his brain.

"I have decided to divulge to Ismail Beg the secret route into the palace," said Janki Devi.

Kunwar Singh's fat body snapped up with a jerk. He could not believe his ears.

Half a century ago, the then King of Kumbher, Raja Balwant Singh's father, had built an underground passage that ran from the palace and re-emerged a safe distance from the city. The existence of the passage was known only to the royal family. In the face of capture, dishonour or death, the secret passage would offer the option to escape. However, it had never been used, for the thought of escape was alien to the Rajputs of Kumbher.

If Ismail Beg entered the passage from beyond the city, it would lead him straight to the palace, right into the heart of Kumbher. It would be the key to victory.

"It is the only way to redeem the situation," said Janki Devi.

"If we are caught, it will be the rope for us," said Kunwar Singh.

Janki Devi turned upon him like a snake. "You were born a fool and coward, and will ever remain one," she

hissed. "Do you believe you will ever get anything out of Jai Singh, especially after your betrayal? And now that we have lost every penny, do you want us to spend the rest of our lives in prison?"

"But will the plan succeed?"

"Of course, it will. I have thought it over. Not more than thirty men are needed to overpower the palace guards and capture the king. At night, with the element of surprise on his side, Ismail Beg cannot fail. He can have half the royal treasure for his pains. And you, my son, shall be King of Kumbher."

Kunwar Singh's face took on a look of low cunning. Here was his chance to turn the tables on his cousin. If his mother said it was a foolproof plan, then it must be so.

"I will make a map giving the location of the secret passage," continued Janki Devi. "You can pass it on to Ismail Beg."

A sudden thought struck Kunwar Singh. "What about that foreigner camped outside?" he asked. "What of Madhoji Sindhia?"

"It will be all over before they even come to know. We have nothing to fear from Senor Noronha. He is a petty adventurer who will not risk attacking Kumbher. He will defend his inaction by one excuse or the other. If worse comes to worst, we will buy him over. Leave that to me."

Kunwar Singh was impressed. His mother had indeed thought of everything. He rose to go. Janki Devi stopped him. "There is only one danger," she said. "I do not know Ismail Beg, but what I have heard of him is far from reassuring. You say he is

your friend. How reliable is he?"

"He will give up his life for my sake," replied Kunwar Singh with a touch of pride.

"His life is of no use to me," snapped Janki Devi. "My question is — can the fellow be trusted to take his share and leave?"

"Absolutely. You can leave that to me, mother," said Kunwar Singh. He patted Janki Devi's shoulder and left the room, heady with dreams of fortune and the lingering effects of wine. Janki Devi was alone once again. Although the night was warm, she felt her palms and soles go cold. She knew only too well the consequences of her actions. She looked furtively around her. The murky shadows of the room seemed to close in on her as if to smother her in reward for her ultimate treachery.

5

It was the telltale plume of dust that first alerted the sentry in Ismail Beg's camp on the outskirts of Najibabad. The sentry shaded his eyes and peered across the flat plain. A lone horseman was bearing down on the camp at a gallop. The sentry watched him approach, and raised his hand. The rider pulled up in front of him. He had obviously ridden hard and long; his mount was foaming at the mouth, and he himself was covered with a layer of dust.

"Take me to Ismail Beg," he said in a voice that brooked no delay.

Almost immediately Ismail Beg emerged from his tent. He too had been watching the man on horseback. "Here I am," he said.

The rider drew a scroll from his waist and handed it to Ismail Beg. It was a message from Thakur Kunwar Singh of Kumbher.

"Ismail Beg," began the message, "your wait is over. It is time to act. It has been decided to let you into one of the most closely guarded secrets of the royal house. Study the enclosed map. It will tell you of a secret route by which you can bring your men into the palace.

"I shall expect you to strike on the twenty-sixth of this month, six days from now. Your task is to overpower the palace guards and hold the king and his son prisoner. Troops loyal to me shall be positioned all over the city, ready to move in when I give the signal.

"Ismail Beg, this is the chance you have been craving for all your life. If we succeed, Kumbher will fall into our hands like a ripe fruit. Half the royal treasure will be yours."

Which meant that the fat fool and his mother would keep the other half as well as the throne, thought Ismail Beg to himself. He read on.

"None but the most trusted of your men are to know of this plan. Surprise will be your biggest weapon. And remember, if you fail, it shall be the end of us all."

Ismail Beg's eyes went over the last lines of the letter. Abruptly he rolled up the scroll and looked up at the messenger. "You may go back," he said.

"I am to receive payment from you for my services,"

he said.

"Of course, how forgetful of me," said Ismail Beg, baring his teeth in a smile. He removed a pouch from his belt and tossed it across.

The messenger opened the pouch. His eyes lit up when he saw that it was filled with gold. He bowed, then turned the head of his horse the way he had come.

Ismail Beg drew a dagger from his waist and took quick aim. The blade flashed in the sun like quick-silver; the next moment it was embedded between the rider's shoulderblades. His arms shot up in the air and he toppled backwards onto the ground without a sound. The horse moved a few yards and stopped, its tail swishing, its ears twitching. The sentry's eyes bulged with horror.

"There is your payment," said Ismail Beg softly. He was still smiling as he retrieved his pouch and tucked it back into his waist. "Take him away," he ordered the sentry, "and send Abdel Khan in immediately."

Ismail Beg then settled down to study the map. It was crudely drawn, but he was familiar with the lay of the land, which made his task easier.

The city of Kumbher was shown as a rough triangle. At one corner of the triangle, corresponding to the highest point of the plateau on which the city was built, was marked the palace. Encircling the city was a thick line, indicating the massive wall that ran around it. Ismail Beg knew that the wall was in a poor state of repair and crumbling in several places. It served no purpose other than marking the frontiers of Kumbher. The east and west gates stood at either end of the wall and were connected by the main road that ran across

the city.

A dotted line, representing the secret passage, ran from the palace due east, extending beyond the eastern wall. This area was dense jungle, bustling with dacoits and wild animals. The line ended at a temple in the midst of the jungle. In other words, from this temple ran the underground passage that opened out somewhere within the palace. Ismail Beg pondered over that dotted line, trying to estimate its route and length.

There was a respectful cough beside him. Ismail Beg looked up, and found Abdel Khan waiting. Abdel Khan was Ismail Beg's deputy. He was a huge, hideous man who had lost an ear in a skirmish many years ago.

"Abdel, my friend, listen carefully," said Ismail Beg. His eyes shone above his hooked nose. "Get together thirty of our best men." He chuckled when he noticed Abdel Khan's bewildered expression. "We are going hunting for a treasure beyond your wildest dreams."

* * *

It was the night of the twenty-sixth. Ismail Beg and his men stood before the temple in the midst of the jungle, east of Kumbher.

It had been a long, tiring journey. For fear of being spotted, Ismail Beg had travelled mostly by night, keeping away from the main tracks and avoiding the villages that lay en route.

The last stretch through the jungle had been the worst. The undergrowth was so dense that the men repeatedly lost their way; the horses stumbled and fell; one of the men was bitten by a snake and had

died in minutes, frothing at the mouth.

Just as Ismail Beg was wondering whether it had all been part of an elaborate hoax, Abdel Khan cut through a clump of bushes and lo! there appeared a clearing. In its midst stood a derelict stone structure. It was the temple.

Abdel Khan surged forward, but Ismail Beg held him back. He cocked his ear, and waited. There was no moon, and the outlines of the temple and the trees behind were almost indistinguishable against the night sky. The only sounds were the sigh of the wind and the whisper of leaves. One of Ismail Beg's men stepped on a dry branch that split with a deafening crack. An owl flew across with a heavy beating of wings. Then there was silence.

Ismail Beg advanced cautiously to the stone steps. He entered the temple. He allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness and entered the sanctum. "Light the torch!" he said to Abdel Khan.

The flame from the torch threw eerie shadows on the granite walls. The sanctum was bare but for a stone idol, mutilated and weather-beaten with time. Ismail Beg and Abdel Khan got down on their hands and knees, peering at the floor and knocking on it, trying to locate the trapdoor to the passage below.

An hour later, they had found nothing. If at all such a trapdoor existed, it had to be beneath the idol. The two men looked at each other.

Ismail Beg grasped the crown of the idol, while Abdel Khan held the trunk. Together they attempted to move the statue. It did not budge. The two men hunched forward, gritted their teeth and strained with

all their might. The statue turned a fraction, then swivelled heavily on its base to reveal a gaping hole beneath.

Ismail Beg stared at the opening as if mesmerised. This was the entrance to the passage that would lead him to Raja Balwant Singh and the treasure of Kumbher!

He lowered himself through the opening. He was out in a trice, coughing and sneezing violently from the foul air within.

It took another hour of impatient waiting before one of Ismail Beg's men declared that the air in the tunnel was fit to breathe. Ismail Beg went down first.

The tunnel descended steeply for a few yards, then levelled out into a narrow passage. The men advanced in a single file, Ismail Beg positioning himself in the middle. Their bodies brushed against thick layers of cobwebs and dust; the clank of their swords reverberated in the confines of the tunnel. The darkness ahead seemed to close in on them. It occurred to Ismail Beg that if this was a trap, they would simply perish like rats in a sewer, with no hope of escape.

After what seemed an eternity, the torch flame burned brighter. Ismail Beg's nostrils caught a whiff of fresh air. The stone floor underfoot began to slope upward. The tunnel ended abruptly. The leading man almost ran into a vertical wall.

Ismail Beg tapped overhead. He moved to the head of the line, tapping as he went. Suddenly a circular patch of stone slid open, allowing in a rush of cool air.

"Come out!" whispered Kunwar Singh's voice from above, "and quickly!"

Ismail Beg grasped the rim of the opening and hoisted himself out of the tunnel. Minutes later, he and his men found themselves in a large hall, lit by the glow of a single candle. In one corner, seated on an armchair and watching their every move was a fat woman clothed in black. She beckoned to Ismail Beg.

"You have kept us waiting far too long," she said. "I am Janki Devi, sister of the king. You have reached this far only with my help, and you will do well to remember it."

Her peremptory manner angered Ismail Beg, but he contained himself. Kunwar Singh, who had been sitting on his haunches near the opening, came up to them.

"This is the ladies' quarters, a separate building behind the palace," he whispered. "I have had the women gagged and confined in the outhouse and the guards got out of the way." He pointed out of the hall. "The entry to the palace is across that garden. The king's bedchamber is on the first floor at the northern end. Jai Singh sleeps in the other wing. Now, what more do you want to know?"

"Where are the king's guards positioned, and how many of them are there?"

"Not more than twenty, roaming about in the corridors. My mother has dismissed the servants early. They live in the outhouses some distance away. In any case, the fellows are unarmed and dare not interfere."

Ismail Beg nodded, satisfied. Suddenly it all appeared to be too easy.

Janki Devi's voice cut through his thoughts. "Remember, the king is to be taken alive. Only he knows where the treasure is hidden. And," she added acidly,

"you will have to do better than last time. The way you turned tail and fled from the fort gates is fresh in my memory."

Janki Devi's face looked grotesque in the dim light, and Ismail Beg was tempted to whip out his dagger and bury it into her. After all, the old hag had served her purpose! He restrained himself with an effort. Without a word he gestured across the room to Abdel Khan and his men. He crossed the hall and went down the steps. His men dispersed into the garden.

Ismail Beg's eyes scanned the silhouette of the palace, searching for the guards, identifying the best access routes to the royal bedchamber. His stomach churned with anticipation.

Suddenly there was a thud of a body falling to the ground, followed by a grunt and a yell. Then there was commotion as figures sprang to life from various points of the building. Ismail Beg's heart sank. He realised that something had alerted the guards — one of his men had been rash, or careless. There was no longer reason for stealth nor time for recrimination. The game was up. To capture Raja Balwant Singh at once, and at any cost — that was now the sole objective. He shouted for Abdel Khan.

A guard with a drawn sword blundered into him. Ismail Beg plunged his dagger into the man's belly. His eyes raked the windows and the corridors on the first floor. How was he to reach the king?

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Raja Balwant Singh awoke with a start. For a moment he thought he was dreaming. The sound of a scuffle

outside his bedchamber dispelled all doubts. His instinct told him that he was in extreme danger.

The king reached for the sword that hung on the wall above his bedstead and buckled it on. He donned his breastplates. This was to be a fight unto death.

There was a crash against the door. The king pulled it open. Fauj Ram stumbled in, his face streaming with blood. Two bodies lay lifeless in the passage.

"The palace is surrounded, Your Highness!" cried Fauj Ram. "My men were taken by surprise. They are dead, all of them! I have failed..." He broke down and clutched the king's feet.

Just then Jai Singh came running down the corridor. He was dressed for battle. "Kunwar Singh and his mother have betrayed us," he gasped. "Ismail Beg is forcing his way up the stairs. He will be here any moment." He grasped his father's arm. "You must escape."

Ismail Beg inside the royal chambers? Escape from Kumbher? What was his son saying? Raja Balwant Singh was bewildered. Then with blinding clarity he knew how his sister had betrayed him. Janki Devi had revealed to Ismail Beg the secret of the underground passage! They had struck tonight. He had harboured vipers in his bosom, and they had struck at his heart.

The grizzled old king rose to his full height. He regarded his son steadily. "Let go of my arm," he said. Jai Singh did not.

"Step out of my way, Jai Singh," said the king. "I command you."

"He shall not," said a voice beside him. Raja Balwant Singh turned. Chandravati faced him. Her face

was set, his eyes determined.

"Jai Singh is right, father." She pointed beyond the windows. "Look over there."

The king froze with shock. He saw tongues of flame leaping up from different points in the city below. The wind carried in the smell of smoke. Kumbher was burning! The sounds of the battle raging in the palace gardens grew louder. It was absurd to think of escape. He had to fight. He grasped his sword firmly and stepped forward, only to find his daughter barring his way.

"Do not go down there, father, I implore you," said Chandravati. "Kumbher needs you alive. Only you can persuade our allies to come to our rescue. Only you can heal the scars of this city."

"Father, you and Chandravati must leave," urged Jai Singh. "I shall keep Ismail Beg engaged." He looked around. "Quick! There is no time to lose!"

The king glanced at Fauj Ram dying at his feet. He looked at Jai Singh, brave and unflinching, ready to sacrifice his life so that his father might live. He closed his eyes. "Tell me what I must do," he said, defeated.

"Take the rear route to the ladies' quarters and leave by the same passage which Ismail Beg used to enter the palace, it is the last thing they would expect you to do." Jai Singh bent down and ripped the cloak off Fauj Ram's body. He draped it over the king's head and shoulders. "Leave the sword behind, it will only slow you down," he advised. "And take care to hunch forward, lest your height gives you away." He propelled them towards the servants' passage beyond the corridor. There they paused.

There was so much that each wanted to say, but did

not. The king was tempted to disclose the location of the strongroom, but decided against it. In the event of being taken prisoner, Jai Singh's chances of staying alive were greater if he remained ignorant of where Kumbher's treasure lay hidden.

Jai Singh touched the king's feet. Chandravati clung to him. "Come with us!" she whispered. "Jai Singh, I am afraid for your life!"

"Those are not the words of a Rajput princess," said Jai Singh tenderly. "Be brave, little one. Everything will be all right. Goodbye."

The clash of swords was now audible on the landing. Ismail Beg's men had advanced to the first floor.

"I must go," said Jai Singh. He shook himself free, turned, and was gone.

The passage was pitch dark. Raja Balwant Singh and Chandravati crept along, feeling their way to the servants' staircase which descended to the far end of the garden. The smells of the kitchen and the scullery hung in the air.

Keeping low, the two of them sidled past the shrubbery that fringed the gardens. Raja Balwant Singh noticed that the sounds of battle were subdued — Ismail Beg must have overcome all resistance, and must now be forcing his way into the rooms, one by one. It would not be long before he discovered that the king was missing.

The area around the ladies' quarters was deserted. Raja Balwant Singh and Chandravati slipped in through the side entrance into the dimly-lit hall. Chandravati clutched the king's arm and pointed.

The marble fountain that used to stand in the

middle of the hall now lay uprooted. Beside the marble base was a freshly uncovered hole. The king ran his eyes swiftly around the hall, took his daughter's arm and hurried towards the opening. They did not notice the sentry lounging in the armchair recently vacated by Janki Devi. With a roar that reverberated in the room the sentry bore down on them, sword held aloft. Chandravati opened her mouth in a soundless scream as the sword pierced her father's cloak. There was a clink as metal met metal. The breastplate had saved the king's life.

The sentry took a breath to raise the alarm. Raja Balwant Singh put his powerful hands around the man's neck and snapped it backwards. There was a sharp crack. The sentry died instantly.

His first yell, however, had been heard. Chandravati could see figures spilling out from the royal chambers into the garden. In a few minutes they would be surrounded by Ismail Beg's men.

They scrambled down the opening. Raja Balwant Singh heaved the marble fountain and wedged it across the hole. It would be removed in no time, he knew, but every precious second mattered.

The air in the tunnel enveloped them like a foul blanket. They ran along in pitch darkness. Chandravati tripped, and her outstretched hands ripped through a curtain of cobwebs as she groped for support. She fell to her knees. There was a rumble overhead as the fountain was rolled off the hole, and the first of the pursuers descended the tunnel. A torch gleamed. The light wavered, then moved towards them.

Raja Balwant Singh tugged Chandravati to her

feet and forced her forward. The tunnel seemed to wind on forever. They hurried along, but Ismail Beg's men were steadily closing the gap between them. Suddenly Chandravati looked down and screamed. The sticks that crackled beneath her feet were not sticks at all, but human bones, dried and bleached with time.

At last they reached the end of the tunnel. Abdel Khan was only an arm's length away. Raja Balwant Singh turned and lashed out at him blindly. It was a lucky blow, for it caught Abdel Khan square on his face, toppling him backwards. The king then grasped Chandravati and heaved her through the exit, then clambered up himself into the temple sanctum.

Drawing on the last reserves of his strength, he strained at the idol and moved it into place. Chandravati sank on to the floor crying and gasping for breath. The muted cries of the men trapped in the tunnel and the thud of their blows beneath the stone idol came to her ears.

Chandravati fainted.

When she came to, she found herself lying in the clearing outside the temple. Raja Balwant Singh was bent over her, watching her anxiously. The first streaks of dawn were beginning to light up the sky. She sat up. Had it all been a bad dream? In her father's eyes she read the grim truth. The King and the Princess of Kumbher were now two fugitives in search of shelter and safety. She asked the question uppermost in her mind.

"What will happen to Jai Singh, father?"

The king said nothing, for there was nothing to

say. He knew he had left Jai Singh behind to fight a losing battle. Valour was no match for treachery! Only time would tell whether his decision to escape was right or wrong. The king sighed. He rose to his feet and looked around him. The jungle seemed to close in on them from all sides.

Raja Balwant Singh had been brought by his father through the secret passage to this spot once before, several years ago. "You will never use this passage, Balwant," he heard his father say. "I know you would rather die fighting." The king laughed mirthlessly to himself. How wrong his father had been! When the time had come, the King of Kumbher had done just the opposite!

Chandravati patted his hand. She seemed to know what was going on in his mind. "Don't blame yourself, father," she said gently. "Remember, we are still alive."

"We must start moving now," replied the king. "Ismail Beg will not rest until we are captured." He walked slowly around the clearing, fixing his bearings, trying to recollect the instructions given to him so long ago. Abruptly he stopped, positioned himself directly opposite the temple entrance, and turned on his heel.

"There lies Kolari," he said, pointing to the trees due south. "It is a three-day march from here, across the ravines and the jungle. It will be a hard journey, my dear."

Chandravati nodded. It did not occur to her to ask the obvious question: where was he taking her? She trusted her father implicitly. She rose to her feet,

brushing the dust and twigs off her dress. "Let us go," she said with a smile. The smile lit up her tired face, and she looked the beautiful princess she was.

6

A brown figure spun through the air and landed in the wrestling pit in a flurry of arms and legs. The sand from the pit rose in clouds. The wrestler picked himself up slowly, sneezing and shaking his head.

"That will be all for today," said Shaubat Khan who had been watching. He leaned back on the cot and regarded both Prithviraj Chandola and his opponent limping out of the pit. "It was a good throw, but it took too long, and with too much effort." He got up, shuffled close to Prithviraj and took his arm. "Here, watch... one, two! " A surprised Prithviraj found himself crashing to the ground.

Shaubat Khan clapped the dust off his hands. "An extra jug of milk for both of you," he announced. An attendant brought a vessel brimming with milk. Prithviraj emptied the jug in a single draught and sauntered off to the nearby pond for a bath.

Prithviraj had been nursed back to health by the old man Shaubat Khan. It had been a torturous journey to Senor Noronha's camp in Harchu four months ago. Were it not for the old man's ministrations, Prithviraj might not have survived.

It had been a painful recovery. Every time Shaubat Khan applied the poultices on his sores, Prithviraj

would burst out in a sweat and bite his tongue to keep from screaming. The rest of the day he remained in his cot, impatient to become fit and fulfil his ambition to join the military. He so desperately wanted to serve Noronha Sahib...

"Noronha Sahib's bodyguard? Why, he won't even let you fill his hookah," observed Shaubat Khan spitting betel juice in a red stream and massaging Prithviraj's injured ankle. "You are of no use to him. You must learn first to wield a sword, to fire a gun."

"I have been practising in my village," said Prithviraj. Shaubat Khan merely smiled. There was a pause.

"Why don't you teach me to fight?" asked Prithviraj suddenly. "They tell me you once were a great soldier and swordsman."

Shaubat Khan's smile grew broader. He scratched his grey beard. "Get well first, then we shall see." Prithviraj sat up and clutched Shaubat Khan's feet. "You must teach me all you know," he pleaded. "I will be ever grateful to you. You know how badly I want to join Noronha Sahib's army."

"So be it," said the old man. "Tomorrow the Sahib leaves for Kumbher with his troops. In a week, we begin our training. But be warned, it will not be easy. You will have to shun every comfort and place yourself completely under my direction. And maybe when the Sahib returns, you will be ready to fight for him. What do you say?"

Prithviraj had agreed unhesitatingly to Shaubat Khan's conditions.

That had been over four months ago. Prithviraj had become Shaubat Khan's most enthusiastic pupil. He

worked steadily at mastering the art of combat. From morn till night, he pursued his aim with unswerving determination. Shaubat Khan, for his part, exercised complete control over Prithviraj, his time, his diet, his very thoughts. He demanded total subservience. In return he offered perfection.

Soon the results began to appear. Prithviraj grew broad in the chest, thick of arm and thigh. His hands struck swift and sure as the hood of a cobra. There appeared a swing in his gait, a confident gleam in his eye. Prithviraj Chandola had become a man.

Shaubat Khan was waiting for Prithviraj when he returned from his bath. "The time has come for you to depart from Harchnu," he said abruptly. Prithviraj stopped drying himself and stood still. He turned slowly to face Shaubat Khan. "I don't understand," he said. "I still have much to learn from you."

"I believe I have taught you enough," replied Shaubat Khan. "Now it is for you to put those skills into practice." The old man paced the courtyard, hands clasped behind his back. "I have information that the Afghan Ismail Beg is holed up at Najibabad, biding his time to attack Kumbher. Senor Noronha is impatient to return to Harchu, and might, therefore, provoke a battle soon." He gazed into the horizon. "I believe the scene is set for a major encounter, and with it, the making and unmaking of several fortunes. This is your chance to prove your worth. Sieze it!"

Prithviraj hesitated. He had not expected so abrupt a dismissal. Shaubat Khan turned to look at him. "You must go," he said. "It is folly to delay any longer."

So it was that young Prithviraj Chandola set out

afresh on the road to fortune. His few belongings were wrapped in a blanket. He spent the morning taking leave of the friends he had made in Harchu. Before leaving, he went to his master and touched his feet. "May God be with you," said Shaubat Khan. His eyes were moist. "Here, take my horse. I have no use for it any more."

Prithviraj walked upto the horse, untied the animal and placed his lumpy blanket across the saddle. He vaulted into the saddle. He slapped the horse's rump, and rode off without a backward glance. Shaubat Khan stood outside his tent, his gaze lingering on Prithviraj's diminishing figure till it disappeared altogether. Prithviraj was the closest to a son he would ever have.

"May Allah be with you," he murmured.

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Prithviraj had been riding long and hard for the better part of the day. The sun was now low in the west. A cold gust of wind blew in from the north, making him realise that winter was not far away. He was now tired. He slackened the reins and allowed his horse to move at its own pace.

All around him was quiet except for the reassuring sounds of crickets chirping in the scrub and birds on the wing. The land sloped gently upward for a couple of miles and dipped thereafter and Prithviraj could see before him only an expanse of grassy plain still green from the rains. As he took a deep draught from his waterskin, Prithviraj recalled his earlier journey, the near-disastrous experience that had been the turn-

ing point in his life.

He looked at the sun and altered course slightly. "Keep the sun over your left shoulder," he had been told at the village where he had halted for his midday meal. "You should be at the edge of the ravines by the end of the day. You will come to a river and a small village where you can rest for the night. Another day's journey, and you will reach Kumbher."

Prithviraj reached the highest point on the plain. Although neither river nor village was yet in sight, he knew he did not have far to go. A dark haze that he now recognised as a row of trees had appeared on the horizon.

The grass beneath yielded to sand. The horse blew its nostrils and broke into a trot. They crossed the clump of trees and rode atop a gentle outcrop of rock. The ground broke away to form a *nullah* (a narrow trench), gouged *across* the plain. A ribbon of water wound along in the middle of the river-bed. It was no swift flowing river, but to Prithviraj there was no sight more welcome or more beautiful.

He dismounted and led his horse down to the water. He watched with satisfaction the flanks of the animal heave as it drank its fill. Then, stripping himself of his clothes, he plunged in. He propped his head on a stone, closed his eyes and revelled in the wonderful feeling of water flowing over and around him.

And then there was the sound of a thin scream. It was neither the sound of animal nor bird, and that fact alerted him. He sat up in the water, ear cocked, and heard it again, a muffled shriek, this time followed by a thud.

Prithviraj leaped to his feet. His horse looked up and whinnied softly. Prithviraj put his hand over its muzzle. He came to the bank and pulled on his clothes. He flattened himself on his belly and peered over the ridge. In the fading light, bobbing in and out of the shadows of the trees, a strange sight met his eyes.

A bearded man and a girl were struggling against three other men. One man had the girl's hands locked behind her while the other two were hammering the bearded man down to his knees.

With a yell, Prithviraj sprang into their midst. For a moment the assailants froze in surprise. Prithviraj drove his fist into the belly of one man. He crumpled without a sound.

Prithviraj then launched himself in a flying kick. His foot rammed into the throat of the second man who fell headlong.

The third swung a stick at Prithviraj. The blow caught him on the thigh. Prithviraj collapsed, his leg numb with pain. The stick swung again, aimed at his head, but was arrested in midair by the bearded old man.

Prithviraj rolled on the ground in agony. He heard the two men, thrashing about him, wrestling for control of the stick. There was a sharp crack as the stick whipped flesh, and then a roar of pain. Again there was a crack, this time accompanied by the sound of running footsteps, and then silence.

A cool hand smoothed his brow. Prithviraj opened his eyes; he gazed into a face clouded with concern. He attempted to rise; his elbows buckled and he fell back with a groan.

"Father, he is badly hurt!" cried the girl. The old man was slumped against a rock trying to regain his breath. He came up and bent over Prithviraj.

"You have saved our lives, good stranger," he said. "We are grateful to you."

Prithviraj smiled weakly, and struggled to his feet. "No bones broken, thank God," he said, looking at the girl. She smiled back, and lowered her eyes.

Prithviraj regarded the two of them. They were dressed poorly, and their bodies were caked with grime, yet he knew instinctively that they were not of the peasant class. The man carried himself with a certain dignity; the girl's voice held culture, her face and hands were delicate. Clearly they were gentry who had fallen upon hard times.

"It is unwise of you to travel in these parts without an escort," said Prithviraj. "Those men would think nothing of slitting your throats for a few bits of jewellery. Whither are you bound?"

"To the village of Kolari," replied the old man. "We did not realise we would have to travel so far."

Prithviraj looked about him. Darkness had fallen. He could barely see the path ahead through the trees.

"Well, I don't know about Kolari," he said. "I will advise you to rest for the night. There is a small village nearby. I shall take you there."

He whistled, and his horse trotted upto him. He gestured to the girl. The ease with which she swung into the saddle only confirmed her good breeding.

The three made way slowly. Prithviraj was aware that the girl was appraising him from time to time. He manfully concealed the throbbing pain in his leg.

"Where are you going, stranger?" asked the bearded old man.

"To the city of Kumbher," he replied.

The girl drew a sharp breath; she and her father exchanged glances.

"What business do you have there?"

"I intend to join the army; it has always been my ambition."

There was a short silence.

"Who will you join?" said the old man,

"I do not know yet. I suppose it would depend on whoever pays me best."

"Even if it means joining a scoundrel like Ismail Beg?" asked the girl with spirit.

Prithviraj looked at her, surprised yet amused. "Actually I intend to serve under my master," he said. "He is now camped outside Kumbher. He is a great general, Senor Noronha by name. You would not have heard of him, of course."

The old man appeared to stumble, for he broke his broad regular stride and clasped his daughter's hand on the saddle for support. The two of them exchanged a long look.

No one spoke till they reached the village.

It took them another hour to find an inn where they could spend the night.

"There is only one spare room in the rear," said the innkeeper, "with one bed in it for the couple." Prithviraj looked away in embarrassment. The girl blushed to the roots of her hair.

"I will sleep outside," said Prithviraj quickly. The old man laid a hand upon his arm.

"We depart at dawn tomorrow," he said. "Once again, I thank you." He paused, then continued, "You are a fine young man. You will go far. As an elder, I have just one word of advice: choose your master with care. He must be worthy of your affection and loyalty. To serve an unworthy master, or an unworthy cause, is to bring disgrace upon oneself."

"You are no ordinary traveller," said Prithviraj. "I knew it the moment I set eyes on you both."

The old man regarded him calmly, appraising him with his wise, solemn gaze. He then drew a ring off his finger and handed it to Prithviraj.

"What is your name?"

"Prithviraj Chandola."

"Prithviraj, I request you one more favour. I know I am already deeply indebted to you, and I hesitate to ask, but believe me, this is a matter of life and death."

Prithviraj waited.

"Give this ring to Jai Singh, the Prince of Kumbher. By the time you reach the city, he may well be king. On the other hand, he may be a prisoner, in which case your task will not be easy."

Prithviraj was intrigued. Who was this old man? He accepted the ring. "It shall be done," he said.

The girl came up to him. "You are our saviour," she said, her eyes twin pools of gratitude. "I shall always remember this." She brushed her fingers against his and smiled her beautiful smile.

Father and daughter entered the inn and were lost in the shadows. Prithviraj stood there for a while, his hand tingling with the girl's touch, his heart filled with an absurd thrill. He turned the ring over in his palm.

In the dim light the red stone in the centre glowed like blood. It was obviously of great value. Whom did it belong to? Why was it to be delivered to the Prince of Kumbher? Would he ever meet the girl again?

He returned to his horse, shaking his head. He spread his blanket under the star? and used his saddle as a pillow. In a few minutes he was asleep. The girl's face hovered tantalisingly in his dreams.

Next morning he checked with the innkeeper and learnt that they had left. It seemed to Prithviraj that fate had once again intervened to re-shape his destiny. He would proceed to Kumbher forthwith and meet Senor Noronha.

7

The week that followed Ismail Beg's capture of Kumbher will ever be remembered as the darkest period in the history of that city. As if to avenge his earlier defeat, he and Abdel Khan went on a mindless rampage, unleashing a brand of cruelty never seen before or since. Innocent men were tortured. Women were pulled out of their homes and insulted. Shops and houses were razed to the ground. Blood was everywhere.

Janki Devi's army did not lag behind either. Ever on the look-out for easy pickings, some of them switched loyalties and gleefully went about looting their own people. The palace was stripped and defaced. The royal gardens were laid to waste. Old and defenceless rela-

tives of the royal family were whipped and imprisoned; the king's generals were put to death.

At about the same time Janki Devi was taken seriously ill, and confined to bed. Kunwar Singh, who had never seen this face of Ismail Beg before, was terrified. Without the support of his mother, he simply decided to stay out of sight for a while.

Ismail Beg awoke early. As usual, it filled him with pleasurable surprise to find himself, not in a leaky tent in Najibabad, but in Raja Balwant Singh's bedchamber. He lay in bed for a while, then rose and threw open the window.

A light mist hung over Kumbher. Ismail Beg inhaled deeply, ignoring the unpleasant chill in the air. He flexed his lithe body, surveying the city below him, savouring his victory yet again.

The victory was not complete, however. Two tasks remained: first, the capture of Raja Balwant Singh; second, the capture of the royal treasure. No progress had been made on either. Indeed, Ismail Beg had been so confident of success that he could not believe it. His expression changed to an ugly frown.

He walked quickly down the steps and out of the palace. The sentries—now his own men—sprang to attention as he passed. He crossed a stretch of garden, crossed the outhouses and the royal stables, ignoring the startled looks of the retainers who hurriedly made way for him. He turned the corner and descended the stone staircase that led to the palace dungeons. There, in the middle of the bare, torch-lit room he stood, arms akimbo, and regarded his prisoner.

Jai Singh hung spread-eagled against the wall. Heavy

chains ran round his wrists and ankles. Fat purple welts from the whip scarred his stomach and thighs. His head lolled to one side, his eyes were shut. Ismail Beg walked upto the prince and prodded him. Jai Singh stirred.

"Where is the treasure room?" asked Ismail Beg.

Jai Singh's eyes flickered open, then closed. Ismail Beg slapped Jai Singh's cheek, and he moaned. "Answer me," said Ismail Beg. His voice was pleasant, as if he were coaxing a reply from a child.

Jai Singh showed no signs of having heard. Ismail Beg's eyes froze into chips of granite. He was tempted to grab Jai Singh by the neck and shake the truth out of him, but stayed his hand; the prince was on the point of collapse.

He turned to go when he heard someone descend the dungeon steps. He flattened himself against a recess in the granite walls and waited. It was Kunwar Singh, muttering to himself. His fleshy face glistened in the torchlight as he passed Ismail Beg and went upto jai Singh. "Jai Singh," he called in a loud whisper, "have you told them anything?" He shook Jai Singh's shoulders. "The treasure, where is it? Can you hear me? God, what has that madman done to you?"

"I haven't finished with him yet," said Ismail Beg stepping out of the shadows. Kunwar Singh whirled around, his face white as a sheet.

"You?"

"At your service," said Ismail Beg with a wicked gleam in his eyes. "It has been a ¹ong time, my friend. Where have you been hiding all this while?"

"You fool, can't you see you are killing him?"

"He is killing himself. He refuses to talk. Incidentally, how did you enter the palace grounds? Didn't my men stop you?"

"You will bear in mind that I am of royal blood," replied Kunwar Singh huffily. "Your oafs dare not stop me." He paused, "May I also remind you that I am responsible for your presence here in Kumbher."

Ismail Beg threw his head back and laughed. "Yes, of course. We are together in this, are we not?"

Kunwar Singh positioned his portly frame before Ismail Beg. "It is ten days since you entered the city. You have still to settle with me and my mother."

"As soon as I find the treasure," said Ismail Beg smoothly. "And now, my friend, I have to go."

"Your men have stripped the palace of everything of value. They have looted the granary and the store-rooms," Kunwar Singh's voice rose to a shout. "Soon there will be nothing left in Kumbher. We want our share now!"

"Don't shout at me, or I will have your tongue torn out by the roots," snarled Ismail Beg with such malice that Kunwar Singh shrank back in horror. Suddenly Ismail Beg flashed a grin. "Let us talk later, shall we?" With that he side-stepped Kunwar Singh, ran up the steps and was gone. Kunwar Singh found his limbs trembling. He realised that he was powerless, that the control of the situation had passed into the hands of Ismail Beg. He had been a fool. What if Ismail Beg cheated him and his mother and gave them nothing, nothing at all? His heart quailed at the thought.

There were other things that bothered Kunwar

Singh. His treachery had made him the prime target of the king's loyalists. It was only a matter of time before they reorganised themselves into a fighting unit. When that happened, his life would be worthless. To make matters worse, his own men were deserting him for Ismail Beg's side. Perhaps they knew, better than him, where the real power lay!

His mother, still sick, was not yet aware of the situation. He had pretended that he and Ismail Beg were in constant touch, that the palace was being done up so that she could move in. Maybe he ought to tell her the truth before things got any worse.

Kunwar Singh went up to his cousin and inspected his tortured body. Jai Singh's condition alarmed him. Did not that fool Ismail Beg realise that Jai Singh was their only insurance against a do-or-die encounter with the loyalists?

Two men came tripping down the dungeon steps. Before Kunwar Singh realised it, he found his hands pinned behind his back and hustled up the steps. Ismail Beg's sentries half-dragged, half-carried him past the stables to the servants' gate and tossed him out into the dust. Kunwar Singh scrambled to his feet, wailing, protesting, humiliated to tears. The sentries lounged at the gates watching him insolently, making sure he did not re-enter.

Kunwar Singh went to his mother and blurted out the true state of affairs.

"You must be the biggest fool in the world to have trusted that man!" fumed Janki Devi pacing her room. Her enormous black robe swirled like a dark cloud as she turned. "And why did you hide the truth from

me all this while? It is too late now!" She smote her forehead. "I am the bigger fool for trusting your judgement. Lord, what have I done to deserve a son like you?"

Kunwar Singh sat in the corner like a repentant child. He took his mother's tongue-lashing without demur, allowing her to let off steam. He knew that finally she would think of something. His mother had never let him down.

"What do we do now?" said Janki Devi at last. Kunwar Singh held his tongue and looked up at her piteously.

"Get out of my sight!" screeched Janki Devi. "I will call you when I need you!"

Kunwar Singh scrambled out of the room. Janki Devi sank on the couch in deep thought, plotting her way out of the mess she found herself in.

Ismail Beg's mood as he stormed into the palace was scarcely better. He was aware that the consolidation of his position in Kumbher depended on finding the treasure at the earliest. Janki Devi's troops still far outnumbered his own, and it would not be long before her antagonism converted itself to open conflict. The sympathisers to the throne would then, unhesitatingly, throw their lot in with her. Ismail Beg regretted that he had not given in to his impulse and murdered her that night when he entered Kumbher.

Where was the accursed treasure?

The search for the palace strongroom had been extremely methodical. Ismail Beg and his trusted associates had proceeded from room to room, and no place, however unlikely, was overlooked. The floors

were inspected for false bottoms, the roof for false ceilings. Pillars were broken on suspicion of being hollow. Every square inch of the garden was dug up; the pond was emptied and scavanged. Ismail Beg unearthed antique chests and huge copper cauldrons which were all empty. He discovered underground cellars that held nothing and passages that led nowhere. His men had now fanned out to the outhouses—the servants' quarters, the stables, the granaries. Their enthusiasm had waned, however. No one but a madman would hide his treasure where he could not keep watch over it! Some of them went so far as to declare that there never existed a treasure in the first place.

Ismail Beg sat on the couch in the palace hall, morosely watching his deputy Abdel Khan move along the wall, knocking as he went, listening for a hollow sound. The tapping infuriated him.

"Stop it, will you?" he growled. Abdel Khan gave him a puzzled look and retreated in haste, Ismail Beg rose, and for the hundredth time prowled restlessly within the palace.

The rooms that till recently resounded with music and laughter, were quiet. The palace servants had vanished, their place taken by Ismail Beg's personal guards — unkempt, cruel-eyed men, who hung about in the doorways and the corridors.

Ismail Beg opened and shut doors absently, running his eyes over surfaces and ceilings. He went up to the first floor, then came down again till he reached a closed door at the rear of the palace, before which sat an old woman who looked at him fearfully as he approached. He did not open that door. He had done

so only once, on the day following the capture of Kumbher; his flesh still crawled at the memory. On that day, ignoring the maidservant's protests, he had kicked the door off its hinges and forced it open. He had seen a cot, and a covered body, and had thrown the white sheet back to reveal the horrible sight beneath. He saw the bald head and the shrivelled neck of a creature that was scarcely human. The eyes were open; black pupils burned in their sockets. Fat, black maggots scurried all over, feasting on the rotting flesh. The overpowering stench caused him to vomit.

The eyes in the skull had moved in their sockets and fixed him with a dead stare. Ismail Beg, no stranger to horrid sights, felt a shiver go down his spine. He had dropped the sheet and backed away hurriedly, never to enter the room again.

Ismail Beg now took out his frustration on the old lady by giving her a spiteful kick. She squealed in pain, and it made him feel better. As he walked back to the bedchamber, he pondered over what he ought to-do next.

8

Senor Noronha dressed carefully for dinner. He wore black trousers with a red stripe that ran down each side, a shirt of gleaming white, and over it a glossy black frock-coat tailored in France. His red silk necktie contrasted with his collar like blood upon a pigeon's breast. His hair was pomaded and tied with

a black cord. His patent leather boots shone. Senor Noronha appeared as if he was hosting a dinner at his villa in Portugal. Which was exactly the effect that he wished to create, for he believed that merely being superior to the natives was not enough; it needed to be reinforced at every moment by every gesture of his. Dabbing perfume on his lapels, Senor Noronha emerged from his tent into the cold night air.

His demeanour gave away nothing of the turmoil that was going on within him. His mission to defend Kumbher had proved a fiasco. The day following Ismail Beg's capture of the palace, Senor Noronha had been out hunting. He and his hounds had left the camp early and ridden long and hard in the surrounding jungle.

Senor Noronha had returned that evening pleased with his catch — two deer, six hares and several fowl. This time he had not employed beaters — the men who flushed the birds and animals out, and drove them into the open to make them easier targets — which made his tally all the more impressive. His eye was getting sharper with age, he told himself proudly.

Imagine his consternation when, on his return to the camp, the Senor learned that Kumbher had been taken from within, and that Raja Balwant Singh was missing! The coup had taken place under his very nose!

Senor Noronha had wasted no time in summoning his deputies and setting out to wrest the city from Ismail Beg. But, horror of horrors, he had failed! Ismail Beg had stayed within the fort and employed the same tactics against Senor Noronha that Jai Singh

had used against him on an earlier occasion. Senor Noronha was beaten back. Only his customary caution had prevented far greater losses to his forces.

The money and the effort he had spent in camping outside Kumbher had been a waste. The question that now hung before him was — ought he stay on or return to Harchu? He would look a fool either way! Senor Noronha wondered what Madhoji Sindhia's reaction would be to the happenings at Kumbher. Of course, he had suitably bribed Madhoji Sindhia's informers and got them to report that he had sustained heavy losses trying to repulse Ismail Beg — but had it been believed? Only time would tell.

Senor Noronha sat on the gilt armchair with his back to the campfire. His valet laid a white napkin across his lap. Senor Noronha brought the armchair closer to the dining table and surveyed his meal — roast chicken, potato fries, rice pulao, and a bottle of wine. The moon in the clear sky above lent perfection to the setting. He had picked up his knife and fork, when he heard the distant clop of hooves. The bodyguard behind him grew instantly alert.

The horseman entered the clearing. He rode up to Senor Noronha, dismounted and bowed. His face was familiar.

"Senor may recall that he saved my life on the plains," said Prithviraj Chandola. "I am now well. I have ridden from Harchu to join your army."

Senor Noronha turned to his valet. "Tell this man to go away," he said. "Allow me to finish my dinner in peace."

"The Senor may forgive the intrusion," said

Prithviraj, standing his ground. He produced the ring from his waistband and held it out. "I believe this belongs to the King of Kumbher."

Prithviraj expected the ring to hold Senor Noronha's attention, and it did. Senor Noronha placed his spoon on the table. He inspected the ring carefully. His eyes narrowed. "Where did you find this?"

"I chanced upon an old man and a girl on my way here," said Prithviraj. "The man bade me give the ring to Jai Singh, Prince of Kumbher, perhaps to indicate that he is still alive. When I learnt later that the king and his daughter had escaped from Kumbher, I knew I had met them, and none other."

Senor Noronha threw his next question casually, yet held his breath for the answer, "And whither were they bound?"

"To the village of Kolari. It lies due east, about three days on horseback."

Senor Noronha was inwardly exultant. He knew where Kolari was. If he could capture Raja Balwant Singh, he would be in a commanding position indeed!

Prithviraj decided that this was an opportune moment to press his own case. "I now request the Senor to bestow a favour upon me. I wish to join the Senor's army in a senior position."

"A youngster like you? Don't be ridiculous."

"I insist that I be given a chance to prove myself," said Prithviraj with quiet dignity.

Senor Noronha leaned back in his chair. He raised his feet, and his valet placed a stool beneath for support. He stared at Prithviraj appraisingly. The fellow possessed a certain confidence; it was hard to believe

it was the same scrawny youth he had seen at Harchu. He seemed so keen to serve him, so eager to prove his loyalty. Well, maybe he would put him to test.

"In a week's time Kumbher will celebrate a festival," said Senor Noronha, "a religious festival of some sort. During that period will be held a wrestling contest, open to all. It is a major sporting event in these parts. Should you win the contest, consider yourself appointed as my personal bodyguard."

"Thank you, Senor," said Prithviraj, and mounted his horse.

Senor Noronha looked up at the stars. He was vaguely surprised at himself for having encouraged a native lad in this fashion. He took out the ring and turned it over in his palm. Behind him, the campfire burned low and cast a golden glow over the scene.

• * *

Prithviraj utilised that week to enter Kumbher and study the layout of the fort and the city. He walked the streets and bylanes, identifying places and memorising locations, should he ever need them. He noted the movement at the east and west gates and tried to gauge the strength of Ismail Beg's forces. He even attempted to enter the palace, but was prevented at the gates.

He learnt that the festival was indeed a great event. True, the scars inflicted by Ismail Beg on Kumbher had yet to heal. The citizens moved about listlessly, the noises of the city were muted. Yet, the tug of tradition was strong, and the people had decided to celebrate the festival with the usual fanfare. It would

at least provide a welcome diversion from the grim situation around them.

On the open grounds at the base of the hill to the south-west, preparations for the occasion had begun in full swing. Cartloads of tent-cloth, bamboo poles and construction material moved to and from the city. Soon the populace of Kumbher could talk of little else but the festival and the wrestling competition that was part of it.

At last the day arrived. It was a fine morning, cold, but less so than usual. Prithviraj took the road to the fairgrounds. Hundreds of men and women jostled past him, eager to reach early. Indeed, it appeared as if the city was being emptied through the west gates! All of Kumbher seemed to be there, dressed in a swirl of colour, laughing, chattering, eating and enjoying themselves. The air was filled with the cries of hawkers and children.

Prithviraj strolled past the tumbling clowns and the dancing bear, wondering whether to take part in the wrestling competition. *If* he did win — a big if — he would achieve his aim of making a career in Senor Noronha's army. Prithviraj bought himself some sweetmeats and ambled on.

He watched trained dogs jump through hoops of fire. He watched the sword-swallower and the magician and the juggler, each making the crowd gasp with his tricks. By and by he came to the wrestling gallery. He went in. The gallery was packed to capacity, and he had to be content with a seat in the upper benches.

The wrestling pit, a square patch of soft red earth, was trowelled to an even surface. The ring was

cordoned off with ropes, and festooned with flags and streamers. In the enclosure beside the ring the contestants were warming themselves up. Their bodies glistened with oil and sweat.

One section of the gallery was reserved for the fair sex, and Prithviraj was surprised to find so many of them present — young and beautiful, giggling and chattering away like sparrows. Another section was occupied by the gentry of Kumbher — the nobles, the subedars and the wealthier merchants. The air buzzed with conversation as the merits of the contestants and the outcome of the event was debated amongst the spectators.

The sound of a bugle cut through the noise. There was an instant hush as all heads turned towards the entrance. Prithviraj craned his neck to get a better look.

A few moments later a man sauntered into view, gaudily dressed in yellow silk trousers and a coat of blue velvet. He appeared to be about ten years older than Prithviraj himself, with a hooked nose and a dashing tanned look about him. Prithviraj leaned across and asked the man in the neighbouring seat, "Who is that?"

His neighbour gave him a look of disbelief. "Don't you know? That is Ismail Beg himself!"

Ismail Beg, followed by his bodyguards, ascended the rostrum and took his seat in absolute silence. Behind him came another man, an ugly giant with one ear, Abdel Khan.

Ismail Beg's presence at the wrestling contest, his usurpation of the traditional role of the royal family,

was an unspoken announcement that he was the reigning power in Kumbher. He looked around him and smiled broadly. He raised a finger to signify the start of the competition.

There was a roll of drums, and the contestants walked into the pit and waved to their supporters. As the organiser introduced each of them, there was wild clapping and cheering. An expectant silence descended as the organiser proceeded to read out the rules. The defending champion would fight only the final bout. The challengers to the crown would have to contest among themselves to reach the final.

The preliminary rounds were predictably short. As the contest progressed, the matches grew keener and more exciting. At last the field was reduced to two. One of the finalists was the wrestler who had won all his fights. The other was the defending champion sitting in the ringside enclosure. At this point came the interval, a break in the proceedings to allow the challenger to recoup his strength and energy.

The interval passed in various displays of skill and brawn. There was the strongman who lifted weights with his teeth and let an elephant walk over his chest. There was a performer who whirled and swung a bamboo stick about him with amazing dexterity. Prithviraj often took his eyes off to watch Ismail Beg's reactions. His expression, however, was merely one of polite interest.

Rested and refreshed, the challenger stepped into the wrestlers' pit. His powerful body was still streaked with red dust. The defending champion rose. He removed the blanket from his shoulders. There was

an audible gasp from the crowd. The young man was magnificently built. His stomach was hard and flat. Muscles rippled in every limb. His stance was feline — relaxed yet watchful.

At a signal from the referee the two wrestlers went into a clinch. They stood swaying in the middle of the pit, every vein and muscle pulsating with the strain. Suddenly the champion bent sideways and to the rear, causing the opponent to lose his footing. Then, in the time it took to bat an eyelid, the challenger's legs were up in the air, and he fell crashing to the ground! The crowd was stunned. The match had ended almost before it had begun!

The organiser jumped into the pit. "Young men of Kumbher!" he cried. "What have we witnessed — a wrestling bout or a slapstick act of clowns? Is there none present here who can put up a better fight?"

There was a buzz in the galleries and the turning of heads, no more. None came forward to take up the challenge.. Prithviraj noticed Ismail Beg whisper to the man sitting beside him. Abdel Khan rose from the rostrum. Every eye followed him as he descended the steps and walked heavily down to the pit. He stripped away his clothes, revealing a barrel chest and thighs like tree trunks. Without waiting for the starting bell, he lunged forward and gripped the defending champion by the neck. The champion put his arms around Abdel Khan's waist and heaved, trying to swing him off balance. He might as well have tried to uproot a tree. Abdel Khan did not budge, merely tightened his hold. The champion writhed and twisted and tried every trick he knew to disengage himself

from the vice-like grip that was squeezing the life out of him. True, he was strong, and possessed a superior technique, but he found his skills useless against this vicious ape who used brute force to smother him alive.

The closing bell sounded like music to the champion's ears. He threw up his hands, admitting defeat, and stumbled back into the enclosure, leaving his blanket and his dignity behind. The crowd broke into applause. Abdel Khan remained unmoved, while Ismail Beg's mouth curved into a smug smile. He stood up, and the galleries fell silent.

"I apologise to the citizens of Kumbher for robbing them of the pleasure of watching a closely fought contest," he said mockingly, his voice loud and clear. "The fault is hardly mine. It appears you will have to wait a while before a worthy opponent to my lieutenant Abdel Khan can be found." He looked around contemptuously.

The organiser jumped into the pit once again. "What do I hear?" he screamed in a frenzy. "Are you all content with witnessing such a poor display? Is the crown to be gifted away in this fashion?"

Ismail Beg's eyes raked the rows of spectators. Quite inexplicably, his gaze fell on Prithviraj and stayed there. "Come forward, young man. Let us see if Kumbher holds any surprises." All heads turned; a thousand eyes stared at him. Prithviraj straightened involuntarily.

"Come down, come down," urged the organiser. Prithviraj rose slowly. He threaded his way through the crowd to the ring. He seemed to be impelled by a force outside himself.

Abdel Khan watched him approach. His fists clenched, his face twisted in a grin.

Prithviraj stripped to the waist. He flexed himself vigorously for a few minutes and stepped into the pit. The spectators, down to the smallest child, waited, breathless. Ismail Beg relaxed in his seat, confident of the outcome.

The two men circled each other warily, waiting for an opening. They met, and Prithviraj found himself locked tight in his opponent's arms. He leaned forward to take the other's thigh—instead, he found himself sprawled in the pit. There was a collective groan from the galleries.

Prithviraj stood up, his body red with dust. Abdel Khan closed in on him once again. Prithviraj dodged, and made a grab for the neck this time. Abdel Khan shifted to his left and tripped Prithviraj. For the second time in as many minutes, Prithviraj landed on his back with a thud.

Prithviraj came to his feet, slower this time. He glanced up at Ismail Beg. He shook his head to clear it, and the crowd jeered. Once again the two men were locked together. Prithviraj felt his knees weaken. The bell rang. The round was over.

The second round fared no better than the first. Prithviraj was simply overwhelmed by the strength and solidity of Abdel Khan. The man seemed impervious to fatigue. At this rate Prithviraj would not last another round!

Prithviraj spent the intermission working out his strategy. On no account, he told himself, should he allow Abdel Khan to get a firm grip on him.

"Look for the weak spot," he heard Shaubat Khan say. "Every swordsman, every wrestler, every fighter no matter how perfect, has a weakness, a chink in his armour. The trick is to find it fast enough. Then you exploit it, and your victory is assured."

Prithviraj ran through in his mind's eye the technique of the man opposite him. What was his weakness? He thought he knew the answer. It was confirmed when the bell announced the third round, and Abdel Khan moved forward.

Prithviraj noticed that Abdel Khan kept his left side away from him. His left leg moved fractionally slower than his right; it dragged ever so slightly, an indication of a suspect limb that escaped all but the most careful observer.

Prithviraj feinted to his left, then dived to his right and gripped his opponent high on his left thigh. Abdel Khan tried to shake him off, but Prithviraj clung on like a limpet to a rock. Together they dropped to the ground and rolled over and over, each trying to pin down the other. Then they jumped up and grappled again.

Prithviraj's heart thudded against his chest. His muscles screamed in protest. He was tiring fast. He knew he had to move in quickly. Again he dived to the left and heaved with all his might. Abdel Khan's knee buckled and he fell heavily into the pit.

In a trice, Prithviraj was on top of him. He rode on Abdel Khan's chest and forced his palms flat on the ground. Every fibre of his body strained to keep the pressure on Abdel Khan's left leg, to keep those massive hands out of reach of his body. Abdel Khan remained

spread-eagled in the pit.

The crowd surged to its feet as one man, screaming and gesticulating in excitement. The organiser shouted the countdown which went unheard in the din. The bell rang. Prithviraj released his opponent and tottered to the edge of the pit. He had won! He closed his eyes. He felt his arm being raised in victory. Someone held a tumbler of water to his lips.

People were everywhere, like ants in a disturbed anthill, shaking their heads and waving their hands, discussing the contest amongst themselves as they dispersed. Others came to congratulate the winner or simply to reach out and touch him.

"A fine victory," said a voice. Prithviraj looked up. Ismail Beg stood before him. "Whither are you employed?"

Prithviraj merely shook his head.

"You are not of this city, then?" Again Prithviraj shook his head.

"Here is a token gift from me," said Ismail Beg, tossing a golden amulet into Prithviraj's lap. He moved away, then said over his shoulder, "You shall see me at the palace tomorrow morning." With that he was gone.

* * *

The sun was gently shining in through the tent flap when Prithviraj awoke. The events of the previous day seemed like a dream to him, although the aches in his body and the amulet under his pillow were real enough.

He got ready for the audience with Ismail Beg,

taking care to look his best. This could be his chance to gain an entry into the palace! He rode down from the camp through the east gate to the palace. The sentries allowed him in with a deference that amused him. "Ismail Beg wishes to see me," said Prithviraj when he reached the steps. The guard went in and returned in a few minutes. "Ismail Beg does not wish to be disturbed," he said. "You can leave, and come later, if you wish."

Prithviraj did not budge. "Tell him Prithviraj Chandola is waiting. Go."

The guard reluctantly obeyed. It was some time before Ismail Beg stomped out onto the porch. His eyes were bloodshot. "What are you doing here? Didn't this fellow tell you to go away?" His voice held none of the pleasantness of the day before. Prithviraj remained silent, waiting for the man to regain his temper.

"What do you want?" demanded Ismail Beg.

"I want nothing," replied Prithviraj evenly. "I am here at your behest, if you recall."

"Go and report to the guard commander at the gate. He will fix you up somewhere for the present. I will call you when I need you." So saying, Ismail Beg strode back into the palace, leaving Prithviraj standing at the steps. The meeting had been a disappointment, to say the least. That afternoon Prithviraj presented himself to the guard commander. He was allotted the routine duty of patrolling the perimeter walls.

Later in the evening he journeyed to Senor Noronha's camp. He found Senor Noronha sitting in his tent, a glass and a bottle of wine before him.

Prithviraj told him of the outcome of the wrestling contest and his subsequent encounter with Ismail Beg. Senor Noronha listened with mounting interest.

"Splendid!" he said, when Prithviraj had finished. "You have proved yourself, my boy!" He rested his chin in his palm and regarded Prithviraj. "There is a task I now give you. You are aware that Jai Singh is held prisoner. Deliver him to me, alive. It is also what the girl — the Princess — desired of you." He smiled. "Now that you are part of Ismail Beg's inner circle, perhaps it should not be too difficult."

Prithviraj nodded wordlessly and turned to leave. Free Jai Singh? He realised he was being dragged deeper into the hotbed of intrigue. He would do his best, however.

Senor Noronha watched him go, and sensed in the youth the arrogance, the self-same determination to succeed that he had possessed two decades ago as Velasco Braganzer Noronha. He leaned forward, filled his glass with wine and sipped it thoughtfully.

9

After the depressing wetness of the monsoons and the humid discomfort of the following months, the onset of winter is a pleasurable event in north India. The air is cold and bracing; the rivers run full, fed by the melting snows from the Himalayas; the countryside is lush and green.

In the midst of one such lush field, tucked away

deep in the village of Kolari, stood a hut. It was noon. A girl appeared at the door of the hut holding a pail. She paused, then walked to one corner of the plot and emptied the garbage. A man, gaunt and bent with age, hurried after her.

"*Rajkumari* (princess), you shouldn't," he protested, reaching for the pail.

The girl turned and smiled, "Duler Singh, I am no longer Chandravati, the princess. If I am supposed to be your daughter, I must behave like one."

Duler Singh was obviously unhappy but held his tongue. He shuffled back into the hut.

Raja Balwant Singh was seated on a bench within. He had aged visibly during the last few weeks. His shoulders drooped, the skin hung loose on his frame, his grey beard had grown white. Only his eyes retained their former majesty, eyes that had witnessed both the glory of power and the ignominy of defeat.

"I cannot bear to watch the *Rajkumari* do menial work in this fashion," said Duler Singh. He waved his shrivelled arm. "I can't even help her."

"You chastise yourself without reason," said Raja Balwant Singh mildly. "You are helping us enough. By sheltering us, you risk your life."

"And gladly," replied Duler Singh. "You know I would lay down my life for you, Your Highness."

The king sighed, and his mind harked back to the time when Duler Singh had served as a stable-boy in the royal stables of Kumbher, many years ago. Raja Balwant Singh, then a young prince, had learnt his first lessons in the art of horsemanship from Duler Singh. Raja Balwant Singh had vivid memories of

himself seated on a spirited horse, clinging on for dear life, while a half-naked Duler Singh stumbled along behind, tugging helplessly at the reins and screaming curses at the animal.

In due course, Balwant Singh ascended the throne. The stable-boy became a trusted servant. There was no one in the court — not even among the members of the royal family — whom Raja Balwant Singh trusted more.

Then tragedy had struck. Duler Singh had been thrown off a horse during one of their excursions. His shoulder had struck a rock and shattered at the impact. The wound had healed with time, but had left his right arm paralysed.

The king had allowed him to stay on in the palace, but Duler Singh sought permission to leave service and retire to his village. For the last twenty years, he had lived in Kolari in total isolation. Only the king knew of his existence, and would send him small sums of money from time to time.

Duler Singh's small hut now provided him with the perfect hiding place. Neither Janki Devi nor Ismail Beg would ever discover him or his daughter as long as they remained at Kolari.

Chandravati adjusted to the alien surroundings and routine as if in the manner born. She learnt to cook and wash and do the household chores. She forced herself to stay indoors except to draw water from the well or hang clothes out to dry. Not once did she complain. Raja Balwant Singh marvelled at the resilience of his daughter. He himself was becoming increasingly restless. He yearned to know what had

become of his kingdom and his son. Was Jai Singh still alive? If so, what had happened to him? What of the ring he had sent through the young man who had saved them from the bandits?

Thus the king brooded the hours away, lying in bed or sitting at the window, a faraway look in his eyes, till a time came when he could wait no longer. So one day, on the pretext of stretching his limbs, Raja Balwant Singh strolled some distance away from the hut; instead of returning, he quickened his pace and made his way towards the nearest cluster of houses. Night had fallen early; a cold wind was blowing. A group of men were squatting in front of a thatched stall. They fell silent and looked up curiously as he approached. Strangers were rare in these parts, rarer still on winter nights. Afraid of being recognised, the king pulled his blanket tighter around him, drew it over his head and under the chin.

The stall owner offered him a pot of steaming tea which he accepted gratefully. He cupped his hands around the clay pot, sipped the tea and looked around. The men were watching his every move, their curiosity giving way to wariness.

Too late, Raja Balwant Singh realised he had no money to pay for his tea. He put the pot down.

"I have left my money behind, good friend," he said, addressing the owner. "But I give you my word, you shall be paid tomorrow."

The stall owner said nothing. He reached forward, grabbed the king's blanket and held it tight. One of the men scrambled to his feet and pounced upon the king. The blanket ripped away as Raja Balwant Singh

wrenched himself free. He knocked down the lantern hanging from the thatched roof. Then, under cover of darkness, he fled back to Duler Singh's hut.

Chandravati listened to her father's account with growing annoyance.

"I could not help myself, you understand," said Raja Balwant Singh, repeating himself in an effort to explain his action. "I only wanted to find out about Jai Singh."

"And almost exposed yourself in doing so," said Chandravati sharply. "Father, don't you realise that if you had been caught, it would have been the end of everything? Why didn't you send Duler Singh instead? Why didn't you tell us first? We were worried sick!"

"It was a dangerous thing to do, master," added Duler Singh as he pressed the king's feet. Raja Balwant Singh said nothing. He closed his eyes. Chandravati felt the pain within him and grew instantly contrite. She reached over and stroked his brow.

"I am sorry, father," she said. "I know how you suffer each day. But just think, if word of this should reach the ears of Ismail Beg, and he decides to investigate..."

"It will not happen again, Chandravati," said Raja Balwant Singh. His voice was tired.

"You promise?"

"You have my word."

Chandravati rose. She walked slowly outside the hut, her brows knit in thought. Despite her father's assurance, she did not trust him. It was only a matter of time before his anxiety overcame caution.

There was another cause for Chandravati's concern. She had discovered that Duler Singh was an alcoholic. At first Duler Singh managed to conceal his addiction, but Chandravati soon suspected the truth. She recognised the signs — the bloodshot eyes, the sudden absences, the way he covered his mouth and spoke with exaggerated clarity. She was not surprised. Pain and loneliness had driven Duler Singh to the bottle. She sympathised with his condition, but the fact remained that Duler Singh could not be trusted either, for drink led to a loose tongue. His addiction made him a potential informer, a threat to their safety.

But whom else could she turn to? Before Chandravati's eye, there appeared the vision of knight galloping towards her on a milk-white steed, vanquishing the enemy with wide sweeps of his sword. He approached without breaking stride, and as he came abreast of her he bent low to gather her up by the waist onto the saddle, and she recognised him as the handsome young man who had saved her from the bandits. Would she ever meet him again?

A gust of wind flung the window open and brought Chandravati back to earth. The night was dark and still. Her hair blew about her face as she absently fastened the window-latch. No, she ought not to dream in this fashion. She was on her own.

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Barely had a week elapsed before Raja Balwant Singh slipped out again to the village. When he returned, he faced the combined wrath of his daughter and his manservant. He was too dispirited even to

defend himself.

"I cannot help it," said the king listlessly. "If I don't know what is happening in Kumbher, I shall go mad."

That was when Chandravati realised that her father's will had collapsed. The burden of seeing him through this trying period now rested with her. She spoke out the decision that she had been working towards all these days.

"I shall go to Kumbher myself," she said. "Yes, father," she added with a smile. "It is the only way."

"Silly girl ! You would be found out in no time, and I couldn't bear to lose you both."

Chandravati sat beside the old man. "We cannot hide here forever, can we? I have a plan, father. I only need your blessing." Chandravati then explained what she intended to do. Raja Balwant Singh and Duler Singh stared at her in astonishment as they heard the plan.

Four days later a horse-drawn cart clattered in through the east gate of Kumbher. Duler Singh sat in the driver's seat, reins in one hand, a half-empty bottle in the other. He drove along the main road and took the avenue that wound up to the palace. He was stopped at the gates.

"Out of my way!" cried Duler Singh.

"Where do you think you are going?" demanded the sentry.

Duler Singh threw him a drunken grin. "I have come to see old friends after many years. I used to work at the palace, see? Is that fellow Samba still here? He used to be a stable-boy in those days, just

like me."

The sentry approached the horse cart with a frown. Duler Singh drew his blanket closer about him. "That is my son in there, fast asleep," said Duler Singh pointing with the bottle to the covered carriage. "He has been driving these nags most of the way."

The sentry decided after his cursory inspection that the man was harmless. "Use the servants' gate, fool," he said. "Or are you one of the royal family?"

Duler Singh smote his forehead in apology. He tugged at the reins, then as an afterthought, dug into the mattress beneath and pulled out another bottle. "That is for you," he said with a wink, then turned the cart around and made his way to the servants' entrance. He pulled up in front of the royal stables. The horses snorted and stamped on the cobblestones.

"Who is there?" asked a voice. A man emerged from the stalls, pail and brush in hand.

"Well, if it isn't Samba himself!" exclaimed Duler Singh. "You rogue, you! Don't you recognise me?"

Samba's face split into a grin of surprise and recognition. "You old devil, Duler Singh! What are you doing here?"

"I have grown old," replied Duler Singh. "I am going to request the king to let me live out my days here. I believe he will not refuse me."

The grin on Samba's face was replaced by incredulity. "You mean you haven't heard? Don't you know that Raja Balwant Singh and the princess are missing? And that the prince is held prisoner in the dungeons?"

"What?"

"It is God's own truth. Ismail Beg, the Afghan, now rules us. Many of our old friends have fled or were killed. My life was spared because I am in Janki Devi's employ and she pleaded on my behalf. Kumbher is gone to the dogs, Duler Singh."

There was a movement in the carriage and a figure sat up. Samba's eyes shifted. "That is my son Chandrabhanu," explained Duler Singh. "You didn't know I got married, did you? Well, she has since gone to heaven, may God rest her soul. Hey Bhanu, wake up, we are at the palace!"

A slim, turbaned youth jumped down from the rear of the carriage and smiled shyly at Samba before busying himself with the horses. "Samba, we will talk later," said Duler Singh. "I am tired from the journey. Here, take care of these nags. Is the outhouse kitchen open?" Samba nodded. "Good, then we will wash up and have our meal. Bhanu, leave the horses and bring down the box will you?" Duler Singh turned to his friend. "Samba, another thing. You don't have to mention our presence to anyone. Now that I cannot meet the king, I think I will simply rest here for a few days and return to Kolari."

Duler Singh and Chandrabhanu walked past the stables and chose a room at the furthest end in which to put their belongings. Duler Singh scratched his stubbly beard and grinned. "You have passed your first test," he whispered. "Samba has not seen through your disguise, Princess."

Chandravati did not return the smile. Her mind was still horrified at the ravages that Ismail Beg had wrought on her beloved city. Chandravati had been

noticing from the rear of the horsecart the signs of decay that had set in. The streets overflowed with garbage and stank. Burnt houses stood out starkly like skeletons. There were hardly any people about, and they moved furtively, keeping their eyes to the ground. Ismail Beg's militia was everywhere.

There was only one saving grace. "Jai Singh is still alive," said Chandravati to herself. "I must find a way to free him." She turned to Duler Singh. "Our task has just begun. It will end only when my father regains the throne."

* * *

Ismail Beg lay sprawled on the couch. The goblet beside him was empty. He leaned across with a grunt and refilled it from the wine jug, spilling wine all over the couch. He emptied the goblet in a single gulp. Ismail Beg was drunk.

"There is no use," he muttered to himself. "Thirty-six days have passed, and I am no closer to finding that accursed treasure." He raised himself on his elbows as if addressing someone across him. "Where is it? I ask myself that question even in my dreams. I have looked everywhere and asked everyone. Does it exist only in the imagination of that blind mason?"

He raised his goblet again, when the door flew open and a man careened in and collapsed on the floor. At the door stood Abdel Khan.

"This fellow was caught trying to break open Jai Singh's cell," he reported. He bent down and pulled the man's hair within an upward jerk. Kunwar Singh squealed in pain. His face was covered with blood.

The place where he had fallen was smudged with red. Ismail Beg's eyes hardened. In them Kunwar Singh saw the shadow of death.

"What were you doing in the dungeons, my friend?" Ismail Beg asked softly. Kunwar Singh did not reply. Ismail Beg flung the wine on Kunwar Singh's face. "Answer me!"

Kunwar Singh made no attempt to wipe it away. "Send him away," he roared. "Send that man away and close the door, and I will tell you."

"Abdel Khan, leave us alone," said Ismail Beg.

Abdel Khan threw a baleful look at Kunwar Singh and slammed the door behind him. Kunwar Singh dragged himself to a sitting position. "I know you will not believe me," he said through bloodied, swollen lips. "But it was the other way round. Abdel Khan was letting Jai Singh out of the cells, and I caught him doing so."

Ismail Beg kicked Kunwar Singh in the rear. Kunwar Singh squealed and hopped around on all fours like a wounded animal. "It is the truth, it is the truth!" he screamed. "I was going to call Samba, our coach driver, so I entered the servants' gate and when I was passing the dungeons, I saw Abdel Khan standing outside holding a horse, and a guard was helping Jai Singh up the dungeon steps. I swear it!"

"And then?"

"The moment Abdel Khan saw me he pounced on me and battered me with his fist. The other fellow dragged Jai Singh back to the cells. Then I was brought here and the story changed when told to you."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Ismail Beg. "What proof do you have?"

"What proof has Abdel Khan got that I was setting Jai Singh free?" countered Kunwar Singh.

"Abdel Khan would never do such a thing. He is my right hand. I would trust him with my life."

"When you came into Kumbher through that tunnel, did you not trust me with your life? Now you would rather believe that murderous ape!"

Ismail Beg said nothing. He stared at Kunwar Singh for so long that it made Kunwar Singh nervous. For once Ismail Beg was confused. His innate suspicious nature, coupled with his depressed mood and semi-drunken state further impaired his judgement. It now appeared to him that it was just possible that Kunwar Singh was speaking the truth, that Abdel Khan could well have planned to kidnap Jai Singh. Had he succeeded, the consequences would have been grim indeed! What if Abdel Khan was in league with Senor Noronha? He was surrounded by rogues, blackguards, traitors!

He stood up, "On your feet," he ordered Kunwar Singh. "I wish to speak to your mother. Now." He strode towards the door. He did not see the sly smile that appeared on Kunwar Singh's face as he followed him to Janki Devi's residence.

"You are a fool and an ingrate," said Janki Devi to Ismail Beg when they met.

They were standing in the courtyard outside Janki Devi's residence. The sun was pleasantly warm. The breeze wafted through the dense branches of the *peepul* tree in the courtyard and its leaves rustled.

Janki Devi's voice was perfectly calm.

"See what that ruffian Abdel Khan has done to my son! Instead of flogging him to death in public, you dare to come here and heap insults on Kunwar Singh and me. I have tolerated you enough. Now get out!"

Surprisingly, Ismail Beg did not react. It was a measure of the troubled state of his mind that he did not strangle Janki Devi on the spot. Instead he said, "You cannot talk to me like that."

"Listen, I hail from a family of Rajputs whose heads have remained unbowed for a hundred years. I brought you here to help me reclaim my legitimate position in the state of Kumbher. Instead, you have reduced us to hostages. Remember, honour runs deep in our blood. If you submit us to further indignities, our soldiers—nay, our citizens—will storm the palace and tear you apart limb by limb."

Ismail Beg raised his hands. "What have I done to you? Nothing at all," he said placatingly. "Tell me, do you really believe Abdel Khan would stab me in the back?"

"That is for you to decide," replied Janki Devi acidly. "I happen to know that Abdel Khan is no longer the same after the wrestling competition, where he suffered an ignominious defeat. You ignored him. You left him lying there, and I hear he has taken it as an insult. He even thinks you might hire the other fellow in his place."

"That is ridiculous!"

"No more ridiculous than accusing my son of trying to free Jai Singh," retorted Janki Devi. She wrapped herself with her voluminous black shawl. "I am going

in. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, what do you think should be done?"

"It is necessary to shift Jai Singh elsewhere," replied Janki Devi promptly. "Send him to Najibabad. Hand him over to Rukhayat Khan. He will be safe there. So will we, since you will no longer have reason to torment us with your suspicions."

Ismail Beg hesitated awhile, then left. Janki Devi and Kunwar Singh watched him walk up the distance to the palace and disappear behind the gates. Janki Devi took a deep breath. The seed of suspicion had been well and truly planted in Ismail Beg's mind. Soon it would take root and grow. He would then act, perhaps on her advice, and shift Jai Singh to Najibabad. He thought Rukhayat Khan was a friend, but she knew better. Rukhayat Khan had been suitably bribed, it was a long shot, but it might work. Anyway, it was the best she could do. She looked at her son and smiled. It was a wicked smile.

"For once you have done things the way I told you," she said. "Now we will wait for the poison to take effect."

Kunwar Singh nodded in agreement.

Ismail Beg, however, had other plans. He decided to follow Janki Devi's advice only in part. Because of the threats from various quarters, he felt it best to move Jai Singh out of Kumbher. But not to Najibabad — never!

10

Prithviraj Chandola stood in front of the barracks, exercising. His body gleamed and smelled of mustard oil. In spite of the cold he was covered with sweat. As he went through his exercises he reviewed the progress he had made so far.

His major achievement was that he had gained access into the palace. From the gossip mill that ground around him, he had learnt about the major characters in the drama of Kumbher — of Ismail Beg and his wild ways, of Janki Devi's treachery, and of the circumstances under which the king and his gentle daughter had to flee. By studying the layout of the city, Prithviraj had also worked out an escape route if and when he managed to free Jai Singh. That was indeed a doubtful prospect. Only four days ago Janki Devi's son had tried it, and had been severely beaten up for his pains!

One of his colleagues from the guard-room came upto him. "Ismail Beg wants to see you," he said.

Prithviraj could not contain his curiosity. "What about?" he asked. The guard shrugged and shook his head. Prithviraj tidied himself and hurried to the palace.

Ismail Beg was pacing the front room. "What took you so long?" he said irritably.

Ismail Beg had visibly changed. His face was etched with lines that made him look older. His hands moved restlessly, there was a hunted look in his eyes.

"I want you to escort a prisoner out of here, out of

Kumbher," he continued. "It is to be done this Friday, the night of the new moon."

Barely had the words left his lips than Prithviraj knew what it meant. Jai Singh was going to be moved! He, Prithviraj Chandola, was to be the escort! The sheer coincidence of it left him speechless.

"What are you staring at?"

Prithviraj pulled himself together with a start.

"I have chosen you because you are new here and apparently capable of defending yourself," continued Ismail Beg. He held up a forefinger. "It is very important that nobody knows of this. I want absolute secrecy." He paused. "Meet me again on Thursday. I shall speak to you in greater detail."

Prithviraj descended the steps. The sunshine was inviting, and he strolled along the paths that fringed the lawn. He could still not comprehend his good fortune. The swing of events might deliver Jai Singh into his hands.

One thing was clear, he could not hope to rescue Jai Singh alone. Ismail Beg would not trust him that far. He would be watched. Also, Jai Singh did not know him and might refuse to cooperate. Prithviraj wished he had kept the king's ring. Anyhow, he would now seek help from Senor Noronha.

Prithviraj did not delay. He reached his room, saddled his horse and rode towards Senor Noronha's camp.

The meeting was brief. Prithviraj revealed to the Senor the task he had been given by Ismail Beg.

Behind his mask of aloof hauteur, Senor Noronha was thrilled. He had failed to find Raja Balwant Singh;

his men had returned from Kolari empty-handed. This new information could once again swing things in his favour!

"I have not been told yet where Jai Singh will be taken," continued Prithviraj. "However, I can make a guess. It is unlikely that Ismail Beg will choose to leave by the west gate, in view of the Senor's presence. Hence, it has to be the east gate, and through the forest beyond."

"You will escort Jai Singh out of the prison as planned," said Senor Noronha. "Leave the rest to me."

Prithviraj took his leave, satisfied at the outcome of his visit. At one stroke he had executed both the Senor's orders as well as the king's request. The Senor would now take care of everything. As he spurred his horse homeward, Prithviraj imagined the princess, brimming with gratitude, willing to give him anything, anything at all, in return for the service he had rendered. The very thought kept him happy.

Prithviraj would not have been so happy had he been able to read Senor Noronha's mind. For, at that very moment, sitting in his tent, Senor Velasco Noronha was plotting to ambush Prithviraj Chandola and capture Jai Singh as they rode out of Kumbher and, if necessary, silence Prithviraj forever.

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Duler Singh and Chandravati were sitting in the horse cart parked in a grove of trees at the far end of the palace grounds. It was dusk, the birds flitted through the trees calling out to each other. Chandravati sipped the hot soup Duler Singh had brought from

the kitchens. The smell of liquor hung about like a cloud, and she moved away. Duler Singh cleared his throat.

"I feel we must act soon, Princess," he said. "You will agree that we have been behaving rather strangely these few days — staying out of sight, moving separately. . . it won't be long before Samba and the rest begin to suspect our intentions."

Chandravati blew at her soup and drank it all. She coiled her hair above her head, then put on the turban. She jumped down from the cart and strolled across the grove, thinking. Duler Singh was right. They could not carry on in this fashion. Why, Duler Singh himself was capable of letting the cat out of the bag in one of his drunken conversations! Yes, it was time to act, but how?

Beyond the trees she could see the outlines of the palace. Suddenly, Chandravati was struck by a thought. Was it possible for her to reach the cells undetected, and get a glimpse of her brother Jai Singh? After all, she knew every inch of the grounds like the back of her hand!

Following her impulse, she crossed the boundary of the grove and approached the stables from the rear. The place was deserted; the horses had been fed early. The night lamps were yet to be lit. Beyond the stables was the fence that sealed off the path to the dungeons. Chandravati slipped into one of the horse stalls and peered out into the gloom.

Two of Ismail Beg's guards lounged at the entrance of the cells. They appeared bored and inattentive, secure in the belief that their prisoner had no means

of escape.

Just then, from the corner of her eye, Chandravati caught a movement among the trees on the far side of the fence. A man was creeping up close, studying the layout of the area, measuring distances with his eyes, as it were. At a spot almost directly opposite her he settled down on his haunches to watch. In the fast fading light his face seemed familiar. Chandravati tiptoed out of the stall and craned her neck to have a better look.

Suddenly, as if aware that he was being spied upon, the man swung his head in her direction. Chandravati gasped. Her hands flew to her lips. It was the young man who had saved her from the dacoits in the ravines! Chandravati leaped back into the darkness of the stall like a frightened deer and turned to flee. The end of her turban caught on a nail and ripped with a noise that was deafening to her ears. She panicked and sped the way she had come, her hair billowing out in waves behind her. She did not stop running till she reached the grove. She rested against a tree, panting.

It *was* Prithviraj — there was no doubt about that! What was he doing here? Whose side was he on? What if he had recognised her? How foolish of her to have ventured towards the cells!

Slowly Chandravati regained her breath. Beneath the confused emotions that welled in her breast, there lingered a warmth, a sense of relief, and a thrill the cause of which she knew, for her cheeks flushed involuntarily at the thought of Prithviraj. If only she could tell him everything, he would know what to do.

Chandravati straightened. She took a few steps, when a hand gripped her arm. She screamed and whirled around. It was Prithviraj! She looked at him like a startled animal.

"I never thought I would see you again," were his first words.

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" she whispered.

Prithviraj shook his head and smiled. He opened his palm to show her a scrap of cloth. "I found this on a nail in the stable," he said. "It is from your turban." She said nothing, so he continued, "You are here to save your brother, aren't you? So am I."

"But what are you doing here?"

"I was returning from Senor Noronha's camp," said Prithviraj. "I thought I would check the security at the prison. I am one of the guards here, you know."

He hesitated, then decided to tell her all. "I have been deputed by Ismail Beg to take Jai Singh out of Kumbher."

Chandravati gasped. "When?"

"On Friday, three days from now. That is why I went to Senor Noronha to ask him for help." He noticed Chandravati's stricken look. "Don't worry. I promise Jai Singh will be a free man soon. As for you, you shouldn't be seen here, it is too dangerous." He paused, and added, "I will have to leave now, Princess."

Chandravati watched him stride away, tall and confident. She walked slowly back to the horsecart, thinking. Although she did not doubt Prithviraj's sincerity, the intentions of Senor Noronha were another matter. She recalled the overtures of friend-

ship her father had made towards Senor Noronha, and of the latter's persistent non-cooperative attitude. What was the guarantee that he would save Jai Singh only to keep him hostage and extort money from her father?

By the time she reached the cart Chandravati had made up her mind. She would send Duler Singh back to Kolari with a message to her father to hurry to Kumbher. There was no time to lose.

Chandravati found Duler Singh curled up in the carriage, dead to the world. An empty bottle lay beside him. Chandravati tried desperately to rouse him but in vain. Duler Singh simply would not awaken. Chandravati was close to tears. What was she to do? As a last resort Chandravati decided to approach Samba for help. Samba, the keeper of the stables, had served the royal family for years. She had no choice but to trust him.

Under the cover of darkness, Chandravati wended her way back to the outhouses and knocked at Samba's door. She could hear him muttering within. There was a creak of the cot, a shuffling of feet. The door opened and light shone on her face.

"Is this any time to disturb people?" demanded Samba angrily.

"It is I, Samba," whispered Chandravati. She tugged at her turban and her hair tumbled down to her waist. It was as if Samba had seen a vision. His eyes grew round, his jaw dropped. The lantern fell from his hand with a clatter. Chandravati slipped past him into the room.

Samba closed the door hurriedly and turned. He

was a wizened old man, bow-legged from a lifetime of riding horses.

Indeed, he had spent so much time in the stables that Chandravati thought he even looked and smelt like one of his animals.

"What is the meaning of this, Princess?"

"I want you to take a message from me to my father, Samba," said Chandravati. "I dare not trust anyone else."

"So His Highness is alive?"

"Yes. He now lives in Duler Singh's hut in Kolari. I will tell you where to find him."

"That is how you are here, pretending to be Duler Singh's son..."

Chandravati nodded. "I will tell you about it by and by. But first I must write a message for father. You must deliver it to him as soon as you can."

"It shall be done," said Samba. He went to the rear of the room, pulled his clothes off the line and went out to change. Chandravati wrote the note to her father. Samba took it from her and tucked it into his waistband. He was ready.

"I am leaving rightaway," he said. "And you be careful, Princess. That fellow Ismail Beg is a madman."

Samba stealthily made for the stables and saddled his horse. Whispering softly to the nervous beast he led it out of the servants' gate. On the main road he climbed into the saddle and broke into a trot.

Although still early in the night, the streets were empty, the lamps unlit. No one left their windows open — to do so would be to invite the attention of Ismail Beg's ruffians. Samba reached the market area.

The shops were shuttered, the alley-ways deserted. All was silent but for the sound of his horse's hoofs.

"Hey, you!" said a voice. The horse snorted. Samba taunted the reins and peered into the darkness. It was a girl who emerged from the shadows.

"Will you take me home, stranger?"

Samba hesitated. He nudged his horse close to the pavement and dismounted. It was the last thing he ever did. A club swung in the air behind him and descended on his head with a thud. He died instantly. He did not feel the next blow.

Two men materialised out of the gloom. They rolled the body over and searched the pockets. They stripped Samba of every valuable item he carried on him. One of them came upon the piece of paper in the dead man's waistband. He was about to throw it away, when he changed his mind and stuffed it into his own pocket. The girl led the horse away. The men carried Samba to a bylane and dumped him into a gutter. They opened a bottle of cheap liquor and emptied the contents all over the body. The three of them then vanished into the night.

The operation, from start to finish, was carried out in less than five minutes, and in total silence.

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Ismail Beg's hands shook as if with palsy. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. He reread the scrap of paper. Before him stood Abdel Khan, the guard commander and another soldier.

"Tell me again, how did you find this paper?"

The soldier shrank at the cold ferocity in Ismail

Beg's voice. He gulped but did not speak.

"He found it with the leader of a street gang," said the guard commander. "There were two of them and a girl on a horse. My man caught them last night while they were trying to slip past the east gate. He interrogated them and may have given them a couple of cuffs on the head before they came out with the truth. They had stolen money from a wayfarer. The men trapped him by using the girl.

"The poor fellow paid with his life. We found him in a gutter in the bazaar."

"The guard commander brought the paper to me," continued Abdel Khan. "I read the contents and thought it important enough to bring to your notice."

"You did right," said Ismail Beg. "Tell me, what more do you know of this dead man?"

"His name is Samba," said Abdel Khan. "He was a stable hand at the palace before Janki Devi took him on as her coach-driver."

Ismail Beg was startled. "Are you sure?"

"The palace staff have identified him without doubt," replied Abdel Khan.

Ismail Beg controlled himself with an effort. He addressed the guard commander, "First, have the body brought here. Second, round up the fellows who have identified the body and throw them in prison. No one is to know about this, and whoever knows is not to speak. Is that clear?" The guard commander nodded and left.

Ismail Beg turned to Abdel Khan. "I want to see Janki Devi and Prithviraj. The two have a lot to answer for." Ismail Beg walked slowly back to his

bedchamber. His mind worked clearly now, honed by his instinct for survival. The first of his tasks was to discover the writer of the anonymous note found on Samba's person. In his mind's eye he went over the text.

The contents were accurate. He had indeed planned to move the prince out of Kumbher on the night of the new moon. The message did not suggest any course of action to prevent Ismail Beg from carrying out his plan. That was left to the initiative of the addressee. It was not the kind of message a master would send to his deputy, or one friend to another. The tone was dignified, respectful, yet carried a certain familiarity. It was a plea for help, addressed to an elder, a close relation. The handwriting was distinctly feminine.

Putting it all together, it struck Ismail Beg that the note was meant for Raja Balwant Singh, authored by Janki Devi herself. But his theory failed on one count: Janki Devi and her brother were sworn enemies. Why then would she ask him for help, or expect such help to be given?

True, it was Janki Devi who had suggested that Jai Singh be taken Najibabad. But the information as to when the shift was to take place was known to only one other person — Prithviraj. The letter was certainly not written by him! Ismail Beg was bewildered. The plot seemed to grow murkier every minute!

Ismail Beg sat on the cot. He stroked his cheek, deep in thought. Of all the conjectures that spun in his brain, there stood out one inconvertible fact:

among his enemies he was alone, and if he was to survive, he ought to act. Soon.

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Janki Devi's estate appeared as if it had been over-run by a herd of elephants. The hedges and vines were torn down, the lawns trampled upon. Every room in the house was invaded by Ismail Beg's militia. A group of servants, Duler Singh among them, stood trembling in the corridors, watching.

Janki Devi stood in the middle of the lawn in a state of shock. Her world was crumbling around her. She gazed in horror as Ismail Beg's troops demolished her property with gusto.

Abdel Khan wrenched her out of the lawn onto the road.

"Where are we going?" asked Janki Devi in fright.

"To meet your Maker!" he replied with a guffaw.

Janki Devi threw a helpless glance around her. No one present lifted a finger in protest as she was dragged towards the palace.

On an armchair, alone in the middle of the palace hall, sat Ismail Beg. He was no longer dressed in the loose robes of an Afghan chieftain, but in the regalia of a king. It was as if there was no further need for pretence. He was no longer an imposter biding his time, but the real King of Kumbher. He sat there, his face cold and impassive as a block of ice. Only the flare of his nostrils and the tension in his clenched fingers betrayed the emotions that churned within him. A body, draped in white from head to toe, lay stretched out at Ismail Beg's feet.

Janki Devi was dragged in front of him. Gone was the image of haughty, bejewelled royalty. In its place was a blubbing woman, frightened for her life.

"So, you plan to kidnap Jai Singh," said Ismail Beg without preamble.

"Why do you torture me like this?" quavered Janki Devi. "I tell you I know nothing, nothing, nothing!" She tripped over her words in haste, repeating herself in terror. Ismail Beg nodded slightly. Abdel Khan stepped forward and gave Janki Devi a free-swinging slap on her face. Janki Devi howled.

"Perhaps that will refresh your memory," said Ismail Beg calmly. Janki Devi whimpered. Abdel Khan raised his hand again, but the blow never landed. Abdel Khan turned to find Prithviraj grasping his wrist from behind. "It ill becomes a man to strike a woman," he said. His even tone matched that of Ismail Beg. Abdel Khan glared at him. Janki Devi took note of him in the room for the first time.

Prithviraj had been brought in Ismail Beg's presence a few minutes earlier. Barely had he returned from his duty on the west wall than he was set upon by a dozen of his colleagues and hauled off to the palace. He had been too surprised to defend himself. By the time he found his tongue they had brought in Janki Devi as well.

"Maybe this fellow can give us some answers," said Ismail Beg, his eyes boring into Prithviraj's. "Tell me, who all know of this plan to shift Jai Singh?"

Prithviraj shrugged. "Nobody else, I should imagine."

"Would you prefer that I pulled your teeth out, one

by one, before you tell me the truth?" said Ismail Beg. Suddenly, with a flick of his foot, he drew back the white sheet and uncovered the corpse on the floor.

Prithviraj looked at the body. The battered face and sickly smell caused him to turn away. Ismail Beg, keenly watching his reaction, could detect no sign of recognition, nothing more than the normal expression of disgust when confronted with the sight of a dead man, brutally murdered.

Janki Devi's trembling hands went to her mouth. Her lips parted in a soundless cry. Her eyes grew wide, she tottered and looked as if she was about to faint. Ismail Beg gave a devilish grin.

"You know this man, then?"

"That's Samba, my coach-driver! How in God's name did this happen to him?"

"I thought you would tell me the answer to that one," said Ismail Beg. "That is why I had you brought here."

"Believe me, I know nothing at all," whispered Janki Devi. Her body was shaking with fear. Ismail Beg regarded her for a while, then pulled the anonymous note from his person and held it out to her. "Read this."

Janki Devi sniffled and wiped her tears away with her sleeve. She stared blankly at the scrap of paper, then, as the contents sank in, a crafty look crept into her eyes and Ismail Beg knew he was close to solving part of the mystery.

"I can tell you who wrote this message," said Janki Devi at last. "In return you must give me your word that you will allow me to live in peace in Kumbher."

"Out with the truth, you old hag!" roared Ismail Beg with such fury that Janki Devi shrank back.

"The writer of this letter is none other than Chandravati," she said hurriedly. "I recognise her handwriting well. She has somehow come to know of your plan, and sent Samba to her father for help."

"Now we will never know where the fellow was headed," grumbled Abdel Khan. "Else we could have laid our hands on Raja Balwant Singh himself."

Ismail Beg rose from his chair and paced the hall, a brigand dressed in regal finery. "And which one of you informed Chandravati?" he asked, his eyes travelling from Janki Devi to Prithviraj and back. There was no response. "Abdel Khan, throw these two in prison. They can keep Jai Singh company. Now take them away and leave me alone."

Ismail Beg continued to pace the room, plagued by a hundred questions. What if the message had been passed onto Raja Balwant Singh through another channel? In which case, once Jai Singh was freed from the cell, would the king not attempt to intercept him? Was Janki Devi telling the truth? Was Samba merely a decoy? Was Rukhayat Khan of Najibabad to be trusted?

Ismail Beg drew a hand over his brow. It was mid-winter, yet his fingers came away wet with sweat. Suddenly, he made up his mind. He would go ahead with his original plan. After all, Samba's death had been effectively suppressed. If the message had not reached the king, there was nothing lost. If it had, then here was an opportunity to face him, to capture him and his daughter. Indeed, anything was better than

having to sit out the days in suspense, waiting for the opponent to make the first move. Yes, that was the way it would be. He *would* take his prize prisoner out on Friday, the night of the new moon.

11

The moment Janki Devi was hustled away to the palace, Duler Singh rushed towards the grounds where the horsecart was parked. Even as he hurried through the woods, over brambles and dew-sodden grass, he prayed he was not too late. He found Chandravati swaddled in her blanket feeding the horses. She jerked upright when he burst into view.

"I have bad news, Princess!" he gasped. "Ismail Beg's men have destroyed Janki Devi's residence and taken her away!"

"What?"

"I saw it with my own eyes." The breath came off Duler Singh's mouth in puffs of steam. "Nobody knows why, but I heard someone say that Samba is dead!"

Chandravati stood still, her brain racing for an explanation. Samba had been caught red-handed with her letter and put to death by Ismail Beg! Janki Devi, being Samba's employer, was automatically the prime suspect. It would not be long before they got on to Chandravati's trail. What would happen then to the plan to shift Jai Singh? Once again the thought of taking Prithviraj's help crossed her mind, but Prithviraj was simply too honest and innocent of guile—how

could he deal with the likes of rascals such as Ismail Beg and Kunwar Singh? No, she would have to act independently. She would, from now on, keep a hidden watch on the dungeons every night to find out her brother's fate.

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It was Friday, the night of the new moon. It was close to midnight, and bitterly cold. The palace and the grounds were shrouded in darkness. The few fires that were lit in the evening to fight the cold were long extinguished. All was still but for the stray hoot of an owl and a flutter of its wings.

Prithviraj sat on the floor of his cell, pondering over the vagaries of his fortunes. What a terrible mess he had got himself into! He had set out of home fired with the ambition of becoming a soldier, of winning laurels at the point of his sword. Instead, he had been enmeshed in a palace intrigue and landed himself in prison.

A rat crept up to nibble at his toe. Prithviraj jangled the chains around his legs to scare it away. The noise brought the guard running. Prithviraj looked at the figure chained to the wall opposite, watching for a flicker of life. There was none. The man's frame had shrunk and wasted away, the eyes were shut, the welts on his body had burst out in sores. Prithviraj was dismayed. Was this human wreck indeed the Prince of Kumbher? Alas, the cruelty of fate!

Prithviraj realised that his recent experiences had made him wise to the ways of the world, opened his eyes to the struggles that went on in the corridors of

power. The plots and counter-plots, the loyalties that kept shifting like a weathervane... He felt he could trust no one any longer, not even Senor Noronha.

But the question that worried Prithviraj by far was one that concerned himself—what was to happen to him? What did Ismail Beg have in mind?

While Prithviraj was thus engaged, two men emerged from the palace and came down the steps. They were dressed in black, and though indistinguishable from the background, a closer look revealed that one of them was tall and hefty, the other slighter in build.

The figures walked swiftly past the garden and turned into the path that led beyond the stables to the dungeons. The guard at the barricade roused himself at the sound of footsteps and drew his sword.

The smaller of the two men threw back the cowl that covered his head. The guard stiffened as he recognised Ismail Beg. His weapon clattered to the ground; he made no move to pick it up. Ismail Beg strode wordlessly past him, followed by Abdel Khan. They descended the flight of stone steps into the dim, cavernous hall below. They turned the corner to come face to face with Prithviraj and Jai Singh. There was a pause as the men eyed each other. "You did not expect me to stick to my plan, did you?" said Ismail Beg with a grin. Prithviraj did not reply.

Ismail Beg slowly drew a dagger from his waistband. He placed the tip of the blade against Prithviraj's throat. He flicked his wrist. A spot of blood sprang out.

"I ask you for the last time. To whom have you revealed the plan?" He pressed the point of the dagger a little deeper.

Prithviraj stared back at him without flinching. "You would not dare to do that if I were armed," he said.

Ismail Beg scratched his chin lazily, as if he were playing a game, and was deliberating on his next move. "You are too insignificant to taste the wrath of Ismail Beg," he said at last. "I have no time for you now, anyway." He turned to Abdel Khan. "So, it shall be as we have discussed. I shall be Jai Singh and you shall be Prithviraj, escorting me out of the dungeons. If there is danger on the way, as I expect there will be, we shall be prepared for it." His teeth flashed in a grin of anticipation. "I am spoiling for a fight! After weeks of idleness, here is a chance for some action, eh, Abdel Khan?" The sound of horses drawing up above reached his ears. He threw a glance at the unconscious prince, hanging by his chains. He jerked a finger at Abdel Khan. Together they ran up the steps to the entrance.

A cold wind was blowing. The horses stamped on the cobbles, impatient to be off. Ismail Beg took the reins from the guard and swung into the saddle. The horse bucked when it felt the weight of the rider, and Ismail Beg wrestled for control. He and Abdel Khan trotted towards the palace gate. Together they rode into the night, Ismail Beg hunched low to disguise his profile. They crossed Janki Devi's house and went down the main road.

Unknown to them, a girl hidden in the undergrowth beyond the fence had been watching their every move. When the sound of hoofbeats receded into the distance, she emerged from the shrubbery and moved

towards the stables. A second figure followed her.

Chandravati knew that neither of the horsemen who had left the scene was her brother. Every nerve in her body still tingled with the discovery. It had struck her the moment she had seen them astride their horses.

Chandravati had ridden alongside Jai Singh for years. She could recognise the swing of his body, his stance in the saddle. Even with the distance and the near total darkness, Chandravati was certain that neither rider was Jai Singh. How was she to know that Jai Singh, in any case, was hardly in a position to mount a horse!

If that were so, then Jai Singh was still in prison!

Then there was no need to follow the horsemen, whoever they were.

Chandravati grasped Duler Singh's hand and dragged him behind her. "What are you doing, Princess?" whispered Duler Singh in panic. "Have you taken leave of your senses?" Instead of a reply, he found himself being tugged through the undergrowth; the rustle sounded like thunder in his ears. They reached the dungeons. The guard, having seen off Ismail Beg, was nowhere in sight. They crept down the steps. On the bottom step sat the other guard, his back towards them.

Chandravati glanced at Duler Singh, indicating the next move with her eyes. He nodded. Flattening himself against the shadows, he descended. He picked up a loose block of granite that lay in his path. Then, with a noiseless bound, he reached the guard and brought the stone down on his skull. The guard

slumped to one side.

Chandravati and Duler Singh hurried into the hall. They searched wildly till they rounded the corner and came upon Jai Singh, and in the adjoining cell, Prithviraj.

Chandravati stood still, aghast. In the flickering flames cast by the wall-mounted torches, Jai Singh looked almost a ghost. And what was Prithviraj doing here? Wasn't he Ismail Beg's right hand man, chosen to escort her brother out of Kumbher?

Prithviraj clambered to his feet. "Chandravati!" She did not seem to hear. She ran up to Jai Singh, her face a mask of horror. With trembling hands, she tugged at his chains.

"Set me free so I can be of help!" said Prithviraj.

Duler Singh went back to search the guard and returned with the keys to the cell. In moments, he had rid Prithviraj of his bonds. It took them a while longer to take Jai Singh off the wall and lay him gently on the floor.

"What do we do now?" asked Duler Singh.

"Why, we hide him! And ourselves too, of course," said Chandravati.

"But where? The prince is in no condition to be taken very far."

"I know a safe place," said Chandravati. "A place right here in the palace, where Ismail Beg and his men would not think of looking in a hundred years! Prithviraj, give me a hand. We will have to move my brother."

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Ismail Beg was sunk low in the saddle, his head resting on his chest, occasionally falling forward as if in fatigue. Only the eyes that flashed beneath his cowl and the whiteness of the fist that held the reins betrayed his alertness. Abdel Khan followed a few paces behind. The night was silent except for the sound of hoofs.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye Ismail Beg caught a noise and a movement, a little behind him to the left. It was a pronounced rustle of bushes, and the horse heard it too, for it threw its head back and snorted. Ismail Beg drew his sword.

Two men sprang out of the darkness and clawed upon his back. Prepared though he was, Ismail Beg was not able to defend himself. His body bent backwards like a bow as the men strained to pull him off the saddle. With a jerk he fell to the ground.

As for Abdel Khan, he was caught completely off guard. One man was now tugging at the bridle of his stampeding horse, for Abdel had been unseated in the first assault. Only his burly frame and his soldier's instinct had saved him from being kicked to death.

Ismail Beg attempted to rise, when one of his assailants aimed a blow at his head. Ismail Beg saw it coming and rolled away, but it caught him on the throat. A ball of pain exploded in his gullet; he retched, and staggered to his feet. He saw Abdel Khan with his arms around one man while using his legs against another. There was a thud as the fellow was sent crashing into the bushes. The assailants regrouped and charged again. It was an unequal fight, for there were too many of them, and Ismail Beg and Abdel Khan soon found themselves spread-eagled on

the ground, heads and legs pinned.

A tall, erect figure appeared from behind the shrubbery. He inspected the prone figure by the light of the torch which one of his men lit for him. "Where is the prince?" he said at last.

Ismail Beg took in the tight-fitting riding clothes, the horsewhip with its ebony handle and brass head, the pale face that gleamed in the torch-flame. He knew it was Senor Noronha. He said nothing. Senor Noronha tapped him on the shin with the butt of his whip. "I asked you a question," he said.

"I am Ismail Beg. Allow me to rise, and you shall be answered."

Senor Noronha motioned to his men to release Ismail Beg and Abdel Khan.

"I changed my mind at the last moment. Jai Singh remains in prison. And who, may I ask, told you of my plans tonight?" said Ismail Beg.

Senor Noronha regarded him gravely. He did not answer the question. "I think I will hold you hostage," he said. "Your life in return for Jai Singh."

Ismail Beg let out a chuckle. "So you threaten Ismail Beg in his own estate? Incredible! Senor, may I, instead, suggest a course of action of mutual benefit to ourselves?" Senor Noronha was silent, so Ismail Beg went on, "We may be strangers, but beneath the skin we are the same. We are adventurers who live by the sword. Why should we care for Kumbher and the royal family? Help me find the treasure, Senor. We will share the booty and return whence we came."

In spite of himself, Senor Noronha was impressed with Ismail Beg and his perception. Indeed, he could

scarcely have expressed his thoughts better. He dipped into his pocket and took out the ring that Prithviraj had given him. "This belongs to Raja Balwant Singh," he said, turning it so that the facets of the red stone glinted in the light. "If you take me to Jai Singh, maybe I can convince him to reveal to me the secret of the treasure."

"Be my guest!" said Ismail Beg grandly. He whistled for his horse. "Abdel Khan," he said, "the Senor and I are going ahead. You can follow with the men." And they set off.

Ismail Beg and Senor Noronha dismounted in front of the dungeons. The first light of dawn was beginning to light up the sky.

The moment Ismail Beg saw the guard sprawled at the bottom of the stairs he knew something was very wrong. He took the steps three at a time, leaping over the body. He sped to the cells and stopped short. Two pairs of chains dangled from the wall. Another pair lay on the cell floor.

Both Jai Singh and Prithviraj had vanished!

12

It was market day in Kumbher. There was brisk traffic at the east gate. Horse-drawn carts laden with goods, men and women with baskets of fruit and vegetables atop their heads, quacks with their medicine chests, hawkers proclaiming their wares at the top of their voices... Goats, cattle, humans, pushcarts and

farm produce jostled for space. The gate sentries watched the proceedings with undisguised boredom. It was not surprising, therefore, that they failed to notice a grizzled old man on horseback enter the gate and join the melee.

Raja Balwant Singh let his mount amble along, careful not to look like one in a hurry. He went up the main thoroughfare, past the congested areas of side streets and low houses, past the more fashionable quarter where the tree-lined avenue led up to the palace. He knew fully well the risk he was taking, the fate that awaited him if he was recognised and caught. Yet, Raja Balwant Singh was too agitated to care. He halted at the end of an empty road, then prodded his horse onward to lace whatever lay in store.

"Uncle!" The king stopped and looked about him. He saw nobody.

"Uncle!" Again the loud whisper. A hand appeared among the shrubbery, beckoning him to the side of the road. He caught the flash of a face; it was Kunwar Singh. He snatched at the bridle and led the horse deeper into the greenery. The king found himself in the far corner of Janki Devi's residence.

"What madness is this?" asked Kunwar Singh, his eyes wide with alarm. "I recognised you the moment I saw you, anyone could have done so. Why did you come back? This place is crawling with Ismail Beg's men."

"Now you can hand me over to Ismail Beg and collect your reward," said the king wearily.

"Uncle, this is a different Kunwar Singh from the one you know! That traitor is dead for ever! I have

learnt my lesson, Uncle, believe me!"

Raja Balwant Singh shook his head. "What new game is this? I am too old and tired to take any more. Where is my son?" He sighed. "When you throw me in prison, be kind enough to put me next to him."

Kunwar Singh clutched the king's feet. Tears flowed freely down his cheeks. "Kill me, but don't torture me with these words," he pleaded. "I have erred greatly, and I beg your forgiveness. I was a fool to trust that man. He has treated me and my mother like the dogs we are!"

"Where is my son? Where is my daughter?"

Kunwar Singh wrung his hands. "I wish to God I knew," he said. "Jai Singh was in the cells till last night. This morning he was found missing. Ismail Beg and Senor Noronha are searching high and low for him. My mother has been beaten black and blue, but I know she knows nothing. As for Chandravati, nobody has seen her in Kumbher."

The king sat still. His suspicion that Senor Noronha was no friend had been proved beyond doubt. Was there no loyalty or fair play left in this world? Now he had only one aim — that of saving the lives of his children. If he had to surrender the treasure of his forefathers for the cause, so be it. "Take me to Ismail Beg," he said.

Kunwar Singh looked horrified. "Impossible! That mad devil will tear you apart! Uncle, there is only one way. Your commanders are lying low, waiting with their men to rally around you. As for me, I am ready to shed every drop of blood for your sake. My troops are at your service. We will give battle to

Ismail Beg." He helped the king dismount. "I will smuggle you home. You hide while I find out the latest news of Jai Singh and Chandravati." He noticed the king hesitate. "This is no trap, Uncle. Trust me."

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That afternoon a small figure clothed in white slipped out from behind the outhouses and wended its way towards the rear of the palace. Anyone who noticed would have grown instantly suspicious. The figure was a woman whose belly protruded unnaturally. Her eyes flitted this way and that. It was the old nurse who looked after the king's bedridden great-aunt.

Only when she let herself into the little room at the far end of the ground floor and closed the door behind her did she dare breathe freely.

"Here is some food," she said. "It was all I could manage." She uncovered a bowl of cold rice hidden in the folds of her dress.

Chandravati and Prithviraj were squatting on the floor as far away as possible from the body on the cot. Jai Singh lay unconscious in a corner. He had neither moved nor spoken, not even when he had been hoisted and carried by Prithviraj from the dungeons to this room the night before. As for being discovered, Chandravati had been proved right. They had not been caught—as yet.

Prithviraj had no desire to eat. The knot of suspense and uncertainty that gnawed at his gut, coupled with the horrible stench that came from the cot, killed the hunger within him. He turned away.

"You must eat," Chandravati's soft, steady gaze was upon him. "You must gather strength to fight the enemy." She smiled.

Prithviraj was warmed by her concern, amazed at her fortitude. She was indeed a wonderful girl, the essence of Rajput womanhood. And how beautiful she looked, even in this moment of adversity! He wanted to speak of his feelings towards her but restrained himself. This was not the time. He took the bowl of rice and the wooden spoon from the nurse and forced himself to swallow the food.

While eating Prithviraj's mind was siezed with the problem of finding a means to escape from the palace. It was only a matter of time before Ismail Beg found them. Of himself he was confident, but what of Chandravati and Jai Singh? Idly he tapped the spoon on the stone floor while his brain searched for a solution.

Suddenly his attention was drawn to the peculiar, hollow sound that came from his tapping. He tapped again. Prithviraj got up, went over to where Jai Singh lay, and tapped the floor with the spoon. A sharp, solid sound reached his ears, quite different from the hollow tone earlier. He went back and tried again. Poonk! He turned wildly to Chandravati and found her staring at him, an odd expression on her face.

"It is hollow beneath this stone, I am sure of it!" he whispered. He ran his fingers lightly along the floor till he came upon a hairline crack encrusted with dust. He removed the dust with his fingernail, and picked out, by and by, an indentation a foot across. With mounting excitement he persisted, till at last he had

cleared a square block of stone. Chandravati was now sitting beside him, watching wide-eyed.

Using the handle of the metal bowl as a lever, Prithviraj loosened one end of the stone and prised it clear of the floor. Then, inserting his fingers in the gap, he lifted the stone slab upright, to reveal a gaping hole beneath! Chandravati's hand went trembling to her throat. She gave Prithviraj a look of anticipation tinged with fear.

Prithviraj reached for the lamp on the wall and shone it into the aperture. A musty odour assailed his nose, and he was hard put to keep from sneezing. A metal ladder, rusty with age, disappeared into the shadows. Prithviraj tested the first rung of the ladder. It sagged under his weight, but held. Gingerly, lamp in hand, Prithviraj descended into the darkness below.

At the foot of the ladder, Prithviraj held the lamp high so that its light fell around him. The sight that met his eyes turned him to stone. His eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

Heavy brass-studded wooden chests lined the room. Some of them were shut, but the ones that were open left no doubt as to their contents. Two chests were piled high with gold coins, two more with silver. Another was filled with jewellery that shone in the dim light like a star-spangled sky. Yet another contained urns, caskets and vessels cast in precious metal, and of immense value.

Prithviraj felt a hand curl around his own. He turned, and found Chandravati by his side, as awestruck as himself. This was why her father had moved her great-aunt into the room above!

They had stumbled upon the treasure of the royal house of Kumbher.

* * *

Ismail Beg sat in the royal bedchamber, his head between his hands. For once, his aggressive nature had been beaten down into submission. He had invaded Kumbher at great cost to himself and his troops. What had he gained? Nothing whatsoever. It had turned to be a victory that tasted like ashes in the mouth. He had hoped to acquire the pearl in the oyster, and he had got nothing but the empty shell. The look of utter contempt that Senor Noronha had given him in front of the empty dungeons still rankled within him, set him on fire every time he thought of it. To think that he had been outwitted by a chit of a girl!

Abdel Khan had quickly formed two search parties. They had taken the two circular paths that flanked the palace grounds. The search of the enclosed area had been carried out in pincer fashion, methodically and swiftly, so as not to miss even a fly. Yet, incredibly, the prisoners had not been found. Every calculation, every logic dictated that they could not have gone far, but there was no trace of them.

Senor Noronha was resting in the guest chamber. The nocturnal ride from his camp had been tiring and fruitless; he had accepted Ismail Beg's hospitality for that day.

Ismail Beg was shaken out of his reverie by a tinkling noise in his room. A little bell was ringing somewhere beneath his cot, sharp and persistent. He got down on his knees and peered under the cot. He could see

nothing. Suddenly he recalled a snatch of conversation he had with the blind mason: 'The king had installed an alarm without my knowledge, a bell that would go off in his bedchamber if someone entered the treasure room. That is how I was caught. It was within a few minutes of my entry...'

Ismail Beg's eyes gleamed with excitement. The bell was ringing now!

He wriggled under the cot, feeling his way towards the source of sound. He touched the bell, and his fingers strayed to the thin wire that ran from it along the wall. He followed the wire, cunningly concealed in the woodwork, barely visible to the eye. The wire threaded its way to the next room and the next. Breathless with suppressed excitement, Ismail Beg tiptoed along the rooms and the corridors, eyes glued to the clue that would lead him to the treasure trove. He finally reached the room occupied by the sick woman, the human skeleton who had scared him out of his wits. He eased the door open with his shoulder. On the floor lay Jai Singh, motionless. In the opposite corner stood a stone slab, and beside it a gaping hole. The shaft of light that emerged from the hole told him that someone was within.

Ismail Beg shut the door gently, and waited.

13

True to his word, Kunwar Singn tried to find out what had become of his cousins Jai Singh and

Chandravati but in vain. Every man in Ismail Beg's entourage had been put on their trail. If ever there was a chance to stage a coup against Ismail Beg, reflected Kunwar Singh, this was the time.

Kunwar Singh spent the rest of the morning contacting his lieutenants and putting them on the alert. Following Raja Balwant Singh's instructions, he had sent an emissary to Madhoji Sindhia asking for help. No longer was Kunwar Singh the sly, shifty-eyed ally of Ismail Beg. His resolve to make amends for his past misdeeds had given him a new-found dignity. He was returning to his residence, when he was way-laid by an old woman he had never seen before. She fell at his feet blabbering with fright. It was a while before he could understand what she was saying. It was so fantastic that he could not believe his ears. Chandravati, Jai Singh and another man were hidden in the palace, in Raja Balwant Singh's great-aunt's room!

Sensing that events were fast spiralling into a climax, Kunwar Singh broke into a run.

A hand holding a lamp emerged from the square hole. A voice said, "Princess, do be careful!" and a moment later Prithviraj's head appeared. His face was turned sideways and down, as if he was watching the progress of someone behind him. He then straightened and looked around, and his eyes met those of Ismail Beg.

After a moment of shocked silence Prithviraj ducked out of view like a mouse into its hole. With a roar

of triumph and pent up rage, Ismail Beg charged after him. He slithered down the ladder and landed in the strongroom like a cat ready to spring. Then, with a slow, deliberate movement, he pulled out his dagger. He did not take his eyes off Prithviraj. His lips parted in a wicked grin, and Prithviraj knew it would be a fight to the death.

Prithviraj struck the lamp sharply against his thigh. The glass exploded and the room plunged into darkness. Simultaneously, he nudged Chandravati to safety behind him. His fingers searched the surface of the chest nearest him and curled around an object that felt like a statue. It was about eighteen inches long, and heavy. It would make a good weapon. He crept forward, ears tuned to catch the faintest sound. The room was silent as a tomb.

There was a rush of air to his left, a clink of metal as a coin fell to the floor, and suddenly Ismail Beg was upon him. Prithviraj staggered back, his hands raised to ward off the blow. There was a spark as the blade of the dagger glanced off the metal statue. Ismail Beg reversed the handle of the dagger in his hand and swung again viciously, missing Prithviraj by a hair. Prithviraj brought the statue down where he thought Ismail Beg's hand should be. He struck an open treasure chest instead, sending hundreds of coins flying with the impact. Then Ismail Beg fell upon him once again. His left hand reached for Prithviraj's throat, his right hand curved to stab him in the back. Prithviraj gave a mighty heave, and Ismail Beg fell back against the row of chests behind him. . J .

Prithviraj's eyes had got used to the dim light, and

he saw Ismail Beg closing in, his face twisted in hate, lips drawn back to bare his teeth like some wild animal. Prithviraj swung the statue and rapped Ismail Beg on the knuckles. The dagger clattered to the floor. The two men grappled with each other, their breath coming in short, hoarse gasps, filling the room with the sound. Chandravati hid in one corner watching them, fearful of the outcome.

Ismail Beg sandwiched Prithviraj against the rim of a box and forced him to arch backwards, inch by inch. It needed all of Prithviraj's strength to shake him off. Ismail Beg plunged his elbow into Prithviraj's abdomen, and Prithviraj doubled up in agony. Ismail Beg closed in to finish him off, when suddenly he let out a yell, raised his foot and hobbled around in circles. A shard of glass from the lantern had embedded itself in his heel!

With one bound, Prithviraj was at Ismail Beg's throat. He was about to bring the metal base of the statue down on Ismail Beg's head when a pleasant voice said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Prithviraj."

Prithviraj's arm stopped in mid-air. He turned in the direction of the voice. Senor Noronha stood at the base of the ladder, one hand on the rail, the other in the pocket of his breeches.

"Let him free," he said calmly.

Prithviraj was about to protest, but Senor Noronha's power of command, the sheer force of his personality, compelled Prithviraj to obey. Reluctantly he released Ismail Beg, who rubbed the base of his neck, retrieved his dagger and grinned at Senor Noronha. He walked negligently up towards them, casting his gaze about him.

"Ah, a pretty pile," said Senor Noronha. "This should keep us in luxury till the end of our days, eh, Ismail Beg?" He noticed Chandravati in the shadows, and bowed. "Honoured to meet you, Princess," he said. He turned to Prithviraj, "We will go up now. You have something to do for me."

The men climbed the ladder back to the little room. Senor Noronha wrinkled his nose at the odour that hung in the air. He gave no more than a passing glance at Jai Singh lying inert in the corner. His pact with Madhoji Sindhia to safeguard the interests of the royal family was totally forgotten. Chandravati brought up the rear.

"You must be a happy man today, Ismail Beg," said Senor Noronha, stepping out into the corridor. "So am I. Your quest for the treasure is over. You have been recompensed for your persistence in the face of dire adversity. As for myself, it has been a long and expensive wait till fate threw us together as brothers-in-arms." He rubbed his jaw and added, "As you rightly observed, beneath the skin we are alike; we are loyal to none but ourselves. I believe I shall be justly rewarded for saving your life."

Senor Noronha's back was towards Ismail Beg, and none but Prithviraj noticed the ugly shadow that flitted across Ismail Beg's face. They came to the main hall and onto the verandah.

"Prithviraj, my boy, you shall ride to my camp, and have four ox-drawn carts and a platoon of hundred armed men despatched here." Senor Noronha's lips twisted into a smile. "I must have the treasure well escorted. One cannot be too careful."

Prithviraj hesitated. His eyes met Chandravati's and he saw the unspoken appeal in them. His conscience urged him to defy Senor Noronha's order, but how could he refuse the man who had once saved his life?

"You have no time to waste," said Senor Noronha sharply, sensing Prithviraj's indecision. "Take your horse and begone."

Prithviraj walked towards the gate, his head bowed. At that moment he did not know whom he hated more, Senor Noronha or himself.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a band of Ismail Beg's men, led by Abdel Khan, approach the palace from the direction of the outhouse. They were obviously returning after a fruitless search for the missing prince. On sighting Abdel Khan, Ismail Beg stepped back a couple of paces till he was directly behind Senor Noronha. With his left hand he gestured to Abdel Khan, urging him to close in. He then drew his dagger and flung it at Prithviraj in one fluid movement. Chandravati, who had been watching, let out a shriek.

Prithviraj ducked instinctively when he heard Chandravati's cry of warning; the dagger flew harmlessly past him. He whipped around in time to see Abdel Khan pounce upon Senor Noronha. For a split second he was tempted to turn back and defend him, but refrained; there were too many of them. Instead, he ran across the courtyard towards his horse. Some of Ismail Beg's men broke away and trailed behind him.

At that very moment Kunwar Singh appeared at the palace gate with some of his troops. In a flash he

grasped the situation. With a tug of the reins he directed his mount to a gallop and fell about him with his sword. His men followed him, yelling. Ismail Beg was startled at this new threat, and so was the search party. Abdel Khan swung Senor Noronha's body around to cover his own, but he was too late. The forelegs of the horse caught him on his spine. Kunwar Singh's sword swung viciously and severed his head clean off his neck.

Ismail Beg looked about him, calculating his chances of victory, of survival at the very least, and made his move. He leaped like a cat onto Kunwar Singh's horse and strained to displace him from the saddle. Kunwar Singh struggled to remain upright, but years of soft living had taken its toll. His strength drained and he fell heavily to the ground. Ismail Beg seated himself firmly in the saddle, swung the mount's head towards the exit and cantered down the courtyard.

"Stop him! Somebody stop him!" shouted Prithviraj, leaping onto his horse to give chase. He could hear the clatter of hoofbeats going down the road at breakneck speed. Digging his heels into his horse, he spurred it in pursuit.

Meanwhile Kunwar Singh's troops were giving battle to Ismail Beg's guards who had joined the fray. The courtyard was filled with the spectacle of men and animals thrashing around, fighting for dear life. Clouds of dust spewed up to the skies. The cries of the wounded and the clash of metal upon metal rent the air.

Soon Ismail Beg's army was worsted; without the leadership of Abdel Khan or Ismail Beg they either fell to the blade or took to their heels. When the last

man surrendered, a deathly silence descended on the courtyard which now resembled a battlefield. Here a horse scrambled back onto its feet and limped away, there a soldier spouted blood and died.

Chandravati shook herself out of her trance and ran up to Kunwar Singh. He lay on the ground, covered with dust and gore, his breath coming feebly, his eyeballs rolling towards the heavens. Chandravati knelt beside him. Kunwar Singh's eyes focussed on her.

"I am dying," he said.

"No, no, don't say such things," said Chandravati in alarm.

"It is but what I deserve," said Kunwar Singh. "I have led a misspent life. I have betrayed Kumbher. I bartered away my honour and plotted with thieves against my own king. I pray God to forgive me for my misdeeds."

His eyes closed, and he appeared to be asleep. Chandravati took his head in her lap. Was this the same man in whose company she had spent so many delightful hours of her childhood?

Kunwar Singh's eyes fluttered open. "Raja Balwant Singh is here in Kumbher. He is now at my residence, waiting for news from me. I have failed him at this moment of death, even as I have in life." His head fell back.

Chandravati was shocked. Her father was here! A shadow fell over her and she looked up. It was Senor Noronha. Gone was his customary poise and hauteur. His immaculate uniform was crumpled and torn. His hair was dishevelled. He was barely able to disguise his pain. Abdel Khan's attack had injured him badly.

"I have lost, Princess," he said formally. "I had gambled for great gains, and failed."

Chandravati looked steadily at him. "That is as it should be, Senor," she said. "You have betrayed us and Madhoji Sindhia, too. Instead of coming to our rescue, you joined hands with Ismail Beg in destroying us. You say you have lost — I say you do not even deserve to be alive." Her voice was neither triumphant nor scornful. "Go back to where you came from, Senor Noronha. We have seen the likes of you before. Men like you have no sense of right and wrong. Gold and silver are your gods. Go away, and look elsewhere. Leave Kumbher alone, at least now."

Senor Noronha opened his mouth to speak, then thought the better of it. He turned and limped away.

Chandravati watched him pick his way slowly past the writhing bodies and the strewn weapons. What a different turn events would have taken had he stood by Kumbher! But greed had blinded his better judgment, as it had blinded Kunwar Singh and Janki Devi.

Chandravati rose. She threw a last look around her, then walked purposefully towards Janki Devi's residence to meet her father.

* * *

The two horses flew along the streets of Kumbher and past the gates. Ismail Beg was crouched low on his mount, his feet kicking viciously into its underbelly, urging it to greater speed. Prithviraj followed hot on his heels. The wind rushed past him peeling his eyelids back from the eyes. Blood coursed like fire through his veins and pounded at his temples. He

Could see nothing before him but the retreating figure of Ismail Beg. At last he would settle scores with the man whose evil genius had brought death and destruction all around him.

Slowly but surely, Prithviraj caught up with Ismail Beg, who glanced back and whipped his horse harder. The hoofs thundered across the plain, shaking the very earth beneath. Once again the gap closed between the two men and Prithviraj was abreast. Ismail Beg whirled and brought his whip down on Prithviraj's shoulders. He reared at the lash. Ismail Beg struck again, but this time Prithviraj reacted by getting a hold of the whip and tugging it free of Ismail Beg's grip, simultaneously pulling his horse away. Ismail Beg's body came up with a jerk. His foot caught in the stirrup. He fell sideways and clung to the bridle for dear life while the horse plunged on in headlong flight. Then, when the strain threatened to rip his arms off their sockets, Ismail Beg let go and rolled over and over on the ground.

Prithviraj stopped short and wheeled his steed back to meet his adversary. He dismounted, drew his sword and prepared for hand to hand combat. Ismail Beg, his face red with exertion, turned to face him.

The two men crouched and circled each other, blades gleaming in the sun. There was not a soul in sight; only the bushes and the naked sky were witness to this clash between good and evil.

Prithviraj made the first move. He lunged forward. Ismail Beg parried with ease and countered with a thrust which would have run through Prithviraj's stomach had he not dodged in time. Their swords

again met with a clang as both men closed in on each other. Prithviraj swung his blade and slashed Ismail Beg on his right arm. A poppy-red patch appeared on Ismail Beg's dress, growing bigger every second as the blood seeped through from the wound.

Ismail Beg clutched his arm with his left hand and continued the duel. He advanced with a twisting motion of his sword, warding off Prithviraj's attack and putting him on the defensive. He knew he was losing blood and would have to make a breakthrough if he was to win. Prithviraj lost his footing on the rubble beneath his feet. Ismail Beg lunged, and again Prithviraj escaped the thrust by a whisker. He steadied himself and engaged Ismail Beg again. The two men fought grimly. Their breath came in gasps. Their sword-arms screamed in protest as the weapons grew heavy and unwieldy in their hands.

With the last reserves of strength at his command, Prithviraj flung himself at his opponent. Ismail Beg's sword fell to the ground with a clatter. He swayed drunkenly on his feet, tired yet defiant.

"So you will take my life," he said, panting. "You fought well. You deserve to win."

Prithviraj raised aloft his sword. Ismail Beg did not flinch. He awaited death with the same disdain that had characterised his life.

Prithviraj lowered his arm. He could not bring himself to kill an unarmed man in cold blood. The fact that his opponent would have no hesitation in doing so, had the roles been reversed, made no difference. Quite simply, he was not a butcher. He gestured Ismail Beg towards his horse.

"I spare your life," he said panting. "You may go. But do not ever show your face again in these parts, for I shall not be so generous the next time."

Ismail Beg did not reply. He staggered to his mount and pulled himself into the saddle. Slowly he rode away. Leaning on his sword, Prithviraj watched him till he was a speck in the horizon. Then, mounting his own horse, he made for Kumbher.

Epilogue

The war of Kumbher was over. Peace descended at last on the wounded city. With the passage of time the citizens put behind them the dark memories of Ismail Beg's pillage, and set to work to rebuild their property and the economy. Once again the city began to prosper and take its rightful place in history.

Raja Balwant Singh declined to ascend the throne. No amount of persuasion would budge him from his resolve. He had lost the stomach for kingship and its attendant tensions. The crown was a burden that he longed to surrender, and the war of Kumbher gave him the opportunity to do so. After a long meeting with Chandravati and his commanders, Raja Balwant Singh agreed to guide the new king for a while.

Senor Noronha recovered soon from his wounds. His lust for money and power continued unabated. His *jagir* expanded into a small state and grew bigger still. With the passage of time his reputation as a master tactician and a successful general overcame

the mistrust that Madhoji Sindhia harboured against him. He emerged as Madhoji Sindhia's right hand man in future campaigns. However, he was later struck down with a mysterious ailment that paralysed his right side. Senor Noronha died in his spacious mansion at Salcete in Goa, at the comparatively young age of forty-eight.

Madhoji Sindhia's life consisted of an unending series of skirmishes, battles, wars and struggles for supremacy. At one stage he was virtually the ruler of the fading Mughal empire, when he liberated the emperor Shah Alam from various aggressors, including the British. But such were the ever changing situations and loyalties of the times that the great Madhoji Sindhia himself was faced with extinction.

As for Ismail Beg, he went on for several more years to inflict upon his hapless victims the special brand of cruelty for which he was notorious. His fortunes continued to rise and fall like the tides, as he scoured the whole of central and northern India, trying to find a treasure to match the one that had slipped through his hands at Kumbher. Along the way he teamed up with another unscrupulous marauder Ghulam Qadir and was emboldened enough to raid and ransack the emperor's palace and the mansions of the Mughal nobles, and even tried to strip the gold leaf off the dome of the Jama Masjid.

Ismail Beg, however, met the end he deserved when he was confronted by Madhoji Sindhia's army off Agra. The Maratha infantry approached from the front with heavy musketry fire, even as the Maratha cavalry moved in from the sides and cut off Ismail

Beg's rearguard. He tried to rally his men for what would have been a suicide charge but was forced by his wife to escape. The escape route lay across the river Yamuna, swollen by floods. Ismail Beg's wife was drowned. He was caught, tortured and finally put to death.

What of the main characters of this story, Prithviraj Chandola the commoner and Chandravati the princess? Prithviraj returned victorious to Kumbher after his duel with Ismail Beg. By and by, he mustered courage to propose marriage to Chandravati, and was overjoyed when she accepted. Departing from tradition, Prithviraj was crowned King of Kumbher. He donned the mantle with grace and ruled wisely and well, thus giving lie to the belief that the ability to rule rests only with those of royal blood. Chandravati bore him many sons, and stood by him both in times of success and adversity.

Prithviraj and Senor Noronha were suddenly equals, but Prithviraj did not forget that he owed the Senor his life. He invited him to Kumbher, played the gracious host, and gifted him with two chests of gold and precious stones when he left.

Neither was Prithviraj's mentor Shaubat Khan forgotten. He was brought to Kumbher and looked after till he died.

Duler Singh was not allowed to go back to Kolari. He spent his last days in Kumbher.

Raja Prithviraj Chandola died honourably on the battlefield. Chandravati, instead of following him into the funeral pyre as was the custom, took over the reins of the state till her eldest born grew of age.

Jai Singh's health did not recover from the damage done during his imprisonment. He lived out the rest of his life as a cripple, to the eternal anguish of Raja Balwant Singh and Chandravati. He was treated with utmost care and respect by Prithviraj till the end of his days. Thus was lost to Kumbher one of its brightest sons.

Janki Devi was released from the dungeons where Ismail Beg had put her. She returned to her residence, broken in heart and broken in fortune. The death of her only son snuffed out her own desire to live. She remained confined to her room on the first floor of her residence. It is said that she went slowly mad, and spent her last days chained to her cot, raving and frothing at the mouth.

As for the emperor Shah Alam, during whose reign the war of Kumbher was fought, nothing more need be said except that he presided over the humiliating collapse of the mightiest empire of all time. The descendant of the great Akbar and the victorious Aurangzeb, was reduced to a blind beggar, an object of pity and ridicule. By the year 1800, the reins of power had passed on into the hands of Arthur Wellesley and the British, where it would remain for a hundred and fifty years.

Wavering loyalties and
high treason from those
closest to the royal family,
cause the prosperous little
kingdom of Kumbher
to pass into the hands
of the avaricious
Afghan, Ismail Beg.
Raja Balwant Singh and
Princess Chandravati
are forced to flee.
Prince Jai Singh is
taken prisoner.
Guarding Kumbher is
Senor Noronha.
Linked with the fate
of them all is that of
Prithviraj Chandola.
Can he help rid
Kumbher of its
enemies?